

Blackreach

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A Thief's Life

Blackreach was a city built on the bones of the past. Ancient ruins lay buried beneath its cobbled streets, whispering secrets only the rats and desperate men dared to hear. From the towering High Spires, where the nobility spun their schemes over wine and roasted pheasant, to the slums of Cinder Hollow, where the air stank of coal smoke and unwashed bodies, Blackreach thrived in filth and fortune alike. Between them lay the Brass Quarter, where smiths and artisans clanged metal into swords and trinkets, and the Silver Wharf, where merchants haggled under the watchful eye of the Queen's tax collectors. And beneath it all? The Undermaze—a tangled nest of tunnels, forgotten crypts, and the echoes of things best left undisturbed.

Caldrek Blackthane called this city home. Not out of love or loyalty, but because no other place would have him.

A middle-aged dwarf of fifty-two winters, he had long abandoned the stubborn honor of his kind. Where other dwarves prided themselves on craftsmanship and duty, Caldrek had chosen lockpicks over forges, silence over loyalty, and survival over everything else. His thick black beard, streaked with iron-gray, was as unkempt as the streets he prowled. His clothes—dark leathers, patched and worn—were made for moving unseen. And his hands, calloused from years of meticulous work, were as skilled at disarming traps as they were at slipping into a noble's coin purse.

Tonight, those hands would be busy.

Caldrek sat perched on the edge of a crumbling rooftop in Shackle Row, the worst part of Cinder Hollow. Below, the streets were alive with the usual business of the desperate—whores called from doorways, drunkards stumbled between puddles of piss, and pickpockets worked their trade under flickering lantern light. It was a fine night for thieving.

He adjusted the small satchel slung across his chest, running a finger over the custom lockpicks inside. Each one was handcrafted—his own design, made with the precision only a master toolsmith could manage. Dwarves were expected to make great weapons, but Caldrek had no need for axes or hammers. His weapons fit in the palm of his hand.

He exhaled slowly, watching his breath coil in the cold night air. His target was moving.

A well-dressed nobleman, fat with stolen wealth and oblivious to the danger around him, waddled out of a gambling den. Two guards flanked him, their hands resting lazily on sword hilts. Not real protection. Hired brutes. Slow, stupid, and predictable.

Caldrek smiled.

Easy work.

He moved swiftly, dropping into the alley below, already anticipating the night's rewards. If he was lucky, the noble carried a fat purse. If he was unlucky, well... it wouldn't be the first time he'd had to run for his life.

Either way, it beat honest work.

Caldrek moved through the marketplace like a shadow, his steps deliberate, his presence unnoticed. Blackreach's Night Market was alive with noise and movement—merchants hawking their wares under oil lanterns, gamblers rolling dice on overturned crates, and cutthroats eyeing easy marks. The air smelled of spiced meats, damp wool, and the ever-present filth of too many people crammed into too little space.

He adjusted his hood, blending into the crowd. His target—the same fat nobleman from the gambling den—had wandered toward a silk merchant, fingers caressing the delicate fabric as he spoke in drunken slurs. His guards stood lazily nearby, one distracted by a red-haired courtesan, the other more focused on picking his teeth than watching his charge.

Sloppy, Caldrek thought, suppressing a smile.

Weaving between drunken revelers, he moved closer, his hands brushing past flowing robes, leather satchels, and dangling coin purses. He plucked a silver bracelet from a distracted merchant's display, tucking it into his sleeve without breaking stride. A warm-up. His real prize hung from the nobleman's belt—a heavy coin pouch, bulging with winnings.

A well-practiced motion, barely a whisper against the noble's silken robe. A quick tug, a careful cut, and the purse was his.

The nobleman let out a loud, obnoxious laugh at some joke he barely understood, oblivious to the fact that he was now several gold pieces lighter. Caldrek slipped away, blending with a group of traders arguing over the price of imported spices. He let out a slow breath, feeling the weight of the purse in his palm.

Easy work, he thought, until a voice cut through the crowd like a knife.

“Hey!”

Caldrek turned his head slightly, just enough to see a street urchin staring right at him, his small eyes wide with realization. The kid had seen everything.

“Thief!” the boy yelled.

The marketplace turned. Guards snapped to attention. The fat noble patted his belt, then paled. Caldrek's stomach twisted—so much for an easy night.

Caldrek cursed under his breath and did what any self-respecting thief would do—he ran.

The marketplace erupted into shouts and confusion, but Caldrek was already weaving through the chaos, slipping past merchants and leaping over carts stacked with overpriced spices. The noble's guards struggled to keep up, their bulky armor slowing them as they shoved past stalls and screaming vendors.

Caldrek ducked into a narrow alley, pressing his back against the damp stone wall. He waited, heart pounding, as the heavy boots of the guards thundered past the alley's mouth. Idiots.

Grinning, he took a moment to check his prize, flipping open the stolen coin pouch. His grin vanished.

Instead of gold and silver, a single gold locket lay nestled in the leather pouch, its delicate chain tangled in a silk handkerchief embroidered with House Fontaine's sigil.

Oh, hells, he thought. *I robbed the wrong noble.*

"Lose something, darling?"

Caldrek stiffened. A woman's voice. Smooth. Amused. Dangerous.

He turned slowly. Lady Maribel Fontaine, a well-dressed noblewoman, leaned lazily against the alley wall, her piercing green eyes twinkling with mischief. She was older, elegant, and held herself with the confidence of someone used to getting what she wanted.

Caldrek had seen her before—a widow of wealth and scandal, known for cheating at cards and collecting lovers like trinkets.

He expected a scream. A slap. Maybe even a knife. Instead, she arched a perfectly shaped brow and smiled.

"If you wanted my locket, all you had to do was ask."

Caldrek hesitated. This wasn't how these situations usually went.

"I—uh—" He cleared his throat. "I thought it belonged to someone else."

Her smile widened. "And yet, here you are, fondling my belongings in the dark. Naughty."

Caldrek tried to step past her, but she moved faster, pressing a soft hand against his chest.

"A thief with such skilled hands... now that's interesting." She leaned in slightly, her perfume a mix of jasmine and something dangerously intoxicating.

Caldrek blinked. He was used to running from guards, dodging blades, and talking his way out of trouble. But being shamelessly flirted with by a noblewoman he'd just robbed?

That was new.

"You're not screaming," he said warily.

Lady Maribel let out a low, throaty laugh. "Why would I? A lady must amuse herself somehow." She plucked the locket from his fingers, trailing a nail across his palm as she did. "You do owe me, though. And I do hate being in debt."

Caldrek wasn't sure if that was a threat or an invitation.

She turned, winking over her shoulder. "Try not to steal from the wrong noble next time, thief. But if you do..." She let the sentence linger before disappearing into the crowd.

Caldrek stood there a moment, staring after her.

What the hell just happened?

Caldrek shook his head, forcing the encounter with Lady Maribel out of his mind. This city was getting stranger by the day.

Pocketing the empty coin pouch in frustration, he melted back into the crowd, keeping his steps light and unnoticeable. He needed to get out of the marketplace before the noble's guards regained their wits.

That's when he felt it.

A shift in the air. The kind of tension that only came when death walked among the living.

Caldrek slowed his pace, his thief's instincts prickling like a dagger pressed to his spine. Someone dangerous was nearby.

And then he saw him.

Mordrak Ironspine.

The half-orc enforcer was hard to miss—towering over the crowd, his bald head covered in old scars, his tusked mouth set in a permanent snarl. He wore his usual dark leather armor, reinforced with steel plates at the shoulders and forearms, each dented from years of breaking bones. A massive gauntlet covered his left hand, thick iron knuckles capable of crushing skulls with a single punch.

Caldrek knew exactly what those knuckles felt like.

He ducked behind a fruit stall, watching as Mordrak stalked through the market, his one remaining eye scanning the crowd. The other had been lost long ago—thanks to Caldrek's blade.

Caldrek's fingers twitched toward his own dagger. Not to use—just for comfort.

Mordrak wasn't here for him. His body language was different. Focused. Hunting.

Caldrek followed his gaze. A thin, hooded man moved quickly through the market, shoulders tense, hands tucked into his cloak. He kept glancing over his shoulder, eyes darting between shadows. A man who knew he was being followed.

Caldrek smiled. Poor bastard. Then he noticed the sigil on the man's sleeve.

His breath hitched. The mark of the Pale Hands.

Queen Isolde's personal enforcers.

Caldrek's smile faded. This wasn't just some debt Mordrak was collecting. This was something bigger.

Mordrak adjusted his iron gauntlet, cracking his thick fingers one by one. The kind of slow, deliberate motion a man makes before turning someone's skull into paste.

The hooded man moved faster, trying to lose himself in the crowd. It wouldn't matter. Once Mordrak had your scent, he never lost you.

Caldrek had two choices. Keep walking. Ignore it. Not his problem. Or—get involved.

And if Mordrak was hunting someone tied to the Queen's secret enforcers, then maybe—just maybe—that meant trouble for Isolde herself.

Caldrek grinned.

Now that was interesting.

Caldrek didn't get involved. Not yet.

He knew better than to interfere in Mordrak Ironspine's work. If the Queen's enforcers were being hunted by her own people, then something was happening behind closed doors—something big.

And that meant opportunity.

Slipping back into the deeper alleys of Cinder Hollow, Caldrek kept to the side streets, his mind already turning toward the future. His little stunt with Lady Maribel had been amusing, but he needed real coin, not some noblewoman's flirty threats.

That's when he saw the message.

A small scrap of parchment nailed to the wooden post outside The Sooted Weasel, his usual drinking hole. A single symbol—a black dagger carved into the paper. A job offer.

Caldrek sighed and tore the note down, heading inside.

The tavern smelled of cheap ale and regret, the usual crowd of thieves, mercenaries, and debt-dodgers gathered in dim candlelight. Grumm Ironjaw, the dwarven barkeep, raised an eyebrow as Caldrek approached.

“You look like you need a drink. Or a coffin.”

Caldrek slid into a seat across from a hooded contact, flipping the note onto the table. “This you?”

The man didn't answer right away. He let the silence linger before leaning forward.

“Lord Castor Veyne's estate.”

Caldrek's eyebrow twitched. A noble job. Dangerous. But worth it. He said nothing, waiting.

The contact continued, voice low and steady. “There’s something inside his study. A ledger. We need it.”

A ledger. Not gold. Not jewels. Information.

Caldrek tapped his fingers against the table. “And what’s in this ledger?”

The contact hesitated, which meant it was something dangerous. Something worth killing for.

“Names,” the man said at last. “And not just any names. Names the Queen wants erased.”

Caldrek exhaled slowly. He was good at stealing, but stealing secrets? That was another level of risk.

The contact slid a small leather pouch across the table. Half up front. More upon completion.

Caldrek weighed the pouch in his hand. Gold. A lot of it.

His eyes flicked up. “And if I say no?”

The contact grinned. “Then we find someone else. But I think you want this, Blackthane. I think you know how valuable it is to have leverage against a Queen who kills her own people.”

Caldrek thought of Mordrak, of the hunted enforcer in the market. Pieces were moving, and he had a chance to place himself right in the middle of it.

He smiled.

“I’ll need a layout of the estate. And double when I’m done.” The contact nodded, standing.

“Then you’d better get to work. Lord Veyne won’t be alive much longer.”

The Heist

Caldrek pushed open the heavy wooden door to his home, stepping inside with a quiet grunt as he shrugged off the weight of the night. The scent of old parchment, steel shavings, and pipe smoke greeted him like an old friend, mingling with the faintest trace of damp stone.

It wasn’t much—just a cramped dwelling in the heart of the Poor Quarter, nestled between a crumbling apothecary and a shoemaker’s shop, but it was his. Four stone walls, a sturdy roof, and a door with six different locks. That was enough.

A narrow worktable sat beneath the only window, covered in half-finished lockpicks, coiled wire, and tiny clockwork mechanisms that clicked faintly when touched. To the left, a fireplace crackled with low embers, the warmth barely enough to push back the city’s cold

fingers. A battered armchair sat beside it, stuffed with old cushions, next to a small shelf crammed with leather-bound books, half of them stolen.

Caldrek moved with purpose, tossing his satchel onto the table before settling onto his creaky wooden stool. He reached for a set of thin steel rods, his fingers moving on instinct as he filed their edges down to a needle-fine point.

A glass vial of oil and powdered coal stood nearby—he dipped the picks into it, coating them for silent movement. A coil of silken cord was looped onto his belt, tested for weight. Light enough to carry, strong enough to strangle, if need be.

The heist at Lord Veyne's estate would require more than just quick hands. It would require precision, patience, and a damn good exit plan.

Caldrek exhaled, stretching his fingers, flexing the ache from his knuckles.

Caldrek settled into the battered armchair beside the fire, stretching out his sore legs as he packed his wooden pipe with finely ground hemp leaves—a favorite plant of his, one his sister had first slipped into his hands years ago with a knowing smile. He struck a match, the tiny flame flickering against the dim light of the room, and took a long, slow drag. The sweet, earthy aroma curled into the air, mixing with the scent of old leather and warm embers.

The tension in his muscles eased, the smoke swirling in his lungs before he exhaled, watching the tendrils drift toward the cracked ceiling. Memories stirred, unbidden.

His grandfather's voice—rough, steady, full of gravel and wisdom—echoed in his mind.

"A man ain't worth much without a place to call his own, boy."

The old dwarf had built this house with his own hands, and now Caldrek sat within it, alone, the walls still bearing the weight of his presence. He could almost see him, hunched over the worktable, chiseling some long-forgotten trinket, muttering curses at the imperfections only he could see.

Caldrek took another drag, his gaze drifting to the faint carving on the stone mantel—his grandfather's initials, worn by time.

"Hope you ain't too disappointed in me, old man."

The fire crackled softly, the room growing hazy with smoke and memory.

And for a moment—just a moment—Caldrek allowed himself to miss him.

Time to get to work.

Caldrek crouched in the shadows outside Lord Castor Veyne's estate, his breath slow, measured. The mansion loomed over the Goldcourt District, a testament to noble wealth and excessive paranoia. High stone walls, iron gates, and armed guards patrolling in well-rehearsed routines.

None of that mattered.

Caldrek wasn't walking through the front door.

With practiced ease, he pulled a grappling hook from his satchel, the steel claw designed with a silent release mechanism of his own making. He swung it up, the hook catching on the ledge of the second-floor balcony. A quick tug confirmed the hold was solid.

He climbed fast, silent as a shadow, ignoring the old ache in his joints. He'd done this a hundred times before, but age had a way of reminding him that rooftops were a young man's game.

At the balcony, he paused, listening. No movement inside. Good.

From his belt, he retrieved a thin, custom glass cutter, pressing it against the windowpane. A quiet pop and the circular piece of glass lifted free. He reached in, unlatched the window, and slipped inside.

Lord Veyne's estate was all polished marble and gaudy tapestries, the kind of place where nobility pretended they weren't just thieves with fancier titles. Caldrek smiled. He was just cutting out the middleman.

Moving swiftly through the halls, he reached the study door. Locked. Not for long.

He knelt, pulling out his personal set of lockpicks, crafted with dwarven precision—each pick etched with delicate grooves for better grip. He worked quickly, the tumblers shifting with practiced ease.

A soft click. Caldrek exhaled. *Too easy.* He pushed the door open and stepped inside, his eyes scanning for the ledger. That's when he felt it.

Something was wrong.

Caldrek's instincts screamed at him. The room was too quiet. Too undisturbed. A nobleman like Lord Veyne should have layers of security. Traps, enchanted locks, or at the very least, a drunken guard passed out in a chair.

But the study was empty—and that made it dangerous.

Keeping his footsteps light, he moved toward the large oak desk dominating the center of the room. Papers were stacked neatly, an ink quill still wet, as if someone had just been here. Caldrek ignored the scrolls, his fingers searching beneath the desk's surface. His patience was rewarded when his nail caught a false bottom in one of the drawers. Click.

The hidden compartment slid open, revealing a thick, leather-bound ledger with a gold clasp. The Queen's mark was burned into its spine.

Caldrek's stomach tightened. He wasn't sure what he expected, but this confirmed it: Lord Veyne was working directly with Queen Isolde.

He reached for the ledger—then froze. A sound. A low, rattling breath. Not his.

Caldrek's dagger was in his hand before he turned. His eyes swept the room, locking onto the far corner, where the flickering candlelight barely touched a metal-barred holding cell with a curtain.

A prisoner.

Caldrek crept forward, his grip firm on his blade. Behind the bars, a figure slumped against the cold stone wall, bound in chains. Blood-matted silver hair, torn robes—an elf.

The elf stirred, weakly lifting his head. Sharp, angular features, bruised and battered. Eyes like dying embers focused on Caldrek.

“Took you long enough, thief,” the elf rasped, voice cracked from dehydration.

Caldrek's jaw tightened. He didn't like surprises, and this was a bad one.

“Who the hell are you?” he demanded. The elf smiled despite his injuries.

“Eryndil Vaelor. Diplomat of the High Elves. And if you don't get me out of here, you're going to regret it.”

Caldrek cursed silently. The ledger was bad enough. Now he had an elven diplomat chained in a noble's room?

This heist was getting worse by the second.

Caldrek glared at the elf, his mind racing. This was not part of the job.

Steal a ledger? Easy. Slip back into the night unnoticed? Even easier.

Rescuing an imprisoned noble elf? That was how you ended up dead or worse.

He looked at Eryndil again—bruised, weak, but not broken. The elf's eyes still burned with arrogance, like he expected Caldrek to break the chains just because he asked nicely.

“Not my problem,” Caldrek muttered, gripping the ledger tighter.

Eryndil gave a dry, humorless chuckle. “You're smarter than you look. But you also know that if you leave me here, you'll be running for the rest of your short life.”

Caldrek's fingers twitched.

The elf wasn't wrong. The moment Lord Veyne realized his high-profile prisoner was stolen from right under his nose, every bounty hunter, mercenary, and city guard would be on high alert. If they caught Caldrek with the ledger, he was as good as dead.

On the other hand, if he rescued Eryndil, the elf owed him—and having a noble ally, even an arrogant one, was worth something.

Caldrek exhaled through his nose. “Damn it all.”

He moved fast. A quick flick of his dagger, and the lock on the cage snapped open. Eryndil winced as Caldrek dragged him up, half-supporting his weight.

“Try to keep up, elf.” Eryndil gave a weak smile. “You’ll be buying me a drink after this.”

“I’ll be buying you a coffin if you slow me down.”

A sharp metallic clang echoed through the estate. Caldrek froze. Then—the heavy thunk of a security latch sliding into place. The alarms were triggered. Caldrek swore loudly.

Heavy footsteps pounded through the hallways. Voices shouted orders. The estate was waking up fast. He slung Eryndil’s arm over his shoulder, gritting his teeth. No turning back now. They needed to get out—fast.

Caldrek hauled Eryndil forward, moving fast as the estate erupted into chaos—guards shouting, steel scraping from scabbards, doors slamming shut to block exits.

The hallways twisted into a maze of locked doors and dead ends, but Caldrek knew the way. He’d planned this heist too well to get trapped like a rat.

A sharp turn took them to the servants' corridor, but as they reached the kitchen entrance, a squad of guards poured in from the main hall, swords drawn.

“There! Kill the thief!” Caldrek cursed, scanning for an escape. His gaze shot upward. The wooden beams above the wine cellar entrance—rotted, weak. No time for second thoughts. “Hope you’re feeling light, elf.” Eryndil’s eyes widened. “Wait—”. Too late.

Caldrek shoved him toward the cellar door, then leapt, slamming his shoulder into the weakened beams. They splintered with a crash, sending barrels of aged wine crashing down, spilling liquid and chaos across the room.

The guards stumbled, slipping on the drenched stone.

Caldrek didn’t wait. He and Eryndil plunged into the cellar, sprinting for the underground tunnels.

Behind them, horns blared, sending word through the city—

The thief and the escaped prisoner were now wanted men.

Blood on the Streets

Caldrek hit the damp stone floor hard, rolling as he landed in waist-deep, freezing water. The Flooded Warrens—Blackreach's oldest, most forgotten tunnels—were a wretched, stinking maze of collapsed sewer lines and abandoned smuggler routes.

And tonight, they were his only way out.

Eryndil landed beside him, groaning in pain. The elf was still half-dead, bleeding from reopened wounds, but at least he was conscious. Caldrek yanked him up.

"Move, elf. The whole damn city's after us."

Above them, muffled shouts and bootfalls echoed through the wine cellar, the guards struggling through the wreckage of their ruined stores.

A horn blared in the distance. *They've already sent the city watch.* Caldrek clenched his jaw. He had minutes at best.

Gripping Eryndil's wrist, he dragged them forward through the freezing black water, wading deeper into the tunnels. The stench of mold, rot, and sewage filled his nose. Rats skittered along the ledges, watching them with beady eyes.

Somewhere ahead, the sound of dripping water echoed ominously.

Eryndil stumbled. "Where are we?"

"The Flooded Warrens." Caldrek pulled him forward. "Keep your mouth shut. Try not to breathe too deep. And whatever happens—"

He stopped. Something moved in the water.

Not a rat. Something bigger. Eryndil tensed. "What was that?" Caldrek didn't answer. They weren't alone down here.

Caldrek moved faster, pulling Eryndil along as the water churned behind them. He wasn't sure if it was just the flow of the tunnels—or something lurking beneath the surface—but he wasn't waiting to find out.

Above them, through the cracks in the tunnel's stone ceiling, they could hear the heavy stomp of boots.

Mordrak Ironspine was on their trail.

Caldrek cursed under his breath. The half-orc was relentless. The Pale Hands—Queen Isolde's personal executioners—had joined him. He could hear them now.

A cold, rasping voice echoed down a side tunnel. "The thief was seen entering the warrens."

Another voice, softer, more sinister: "Trap the exits. Flush them out." Caldrek gritted his teeth.

The Pale Hands didn't hunt like normal mercenaries. They were ghosts in the dark, trained killers who relied on silence, poison, and ambushes. If they found him in these tunnels, he wouldn't just die—he'd vanish, like he never existed.

He grabbed Eryndil by the collar, forcing him to focus. "We don't have time to bleed, elf. We move, or we die." A sudden splash echoed through the tunnel, sending ripples across the water. Then—a soft, wet thunk. Caldrek froze. His stomach twisted. That was the sound of a body dropping into the water. Eryndil's breath hitched. "They're already down here," he whispered.

Caldrek nodded. The Pale Hands weren't just tracking them. They were already hunting.

Caldrek's mind raced. No time to think, no time to plan. The Pale Hands were already in the tunnels, moving like shadows, silent, unseen, and already too close.

Another sound—a faint splash, a whisper of movement. Caldrek's instincts screamed at him. No way forward. No way back. Which left only one way to go.

"Up. Now." He grabbed Eryndil's arm and yanked him toward a rusted maintenance ladder, half-hidden beneath the slick stone arch. The elf didn't argue—just followed, fast, his breath coming short and tight.

Caldrek scrambled up first, ignoring the burn in his arms, the slick rungs beneath his fingers.

Caldrek hated rooftops.

Not because of the height—he could handle that. It was the damn lack of cover that made them suicidal escape routes.

And yet, here he was, hauling himself up onto a crumbling rooftop in the Lower Brass Quarter, Eryndil gasping beside him. The Flooded Warrens had turned into a death trap, and the only way out had been up. Bad idea. Because Mordrak Ironspine was already waiting for him.

The half-orc enforcer stood like a wall of muscle and iron, his massive frame silhouetted against the moonlight. His one remaining eye gleamed with fury, and his iron-plated gauntlet flexed, fingers curling into a massive, bone-breaking fist.

"Should've stayed underground, maggot." Mordrak's voice was like gravel grinding under boots.

Caldrek didn't waste time talking. He lunged.

Mordrak was faster than he looked. He sidestepped, grabbing Caldrek mid-strike and lifting him clean off the ground. Then came the pain. Mordrak's fist slammed into Caldrek's ribs, the impact like getting hit by a runaway cart.

Caldrek felt something crack—maybe one rib, maybe three. His vision blurred with pain. Mordrak tossed him aside like a ragdoll. Caldrek rolled, gasping, struggling to his feet.

Eryndil tried to help, but Mordrak closed the distance too fast. He backhanded the elf hard enough to send him sprawling. Caldrek staggered up, breathing sharp and painful. He had seconds before Mordrak finished the job. He needed to be faster. Smarter.

Mordrak charged, raising his iron gauntlet for a killing blow. Caldrek waited until the last second— Then he ducked low and kicked out, smashing his boot into Mordrak's knee. The half-orc bellowed in pain, stumbling. Caldrek seized his chance—he sprinted for the edge of the rooftop. “Coward!” Mordrak roared. Caldrek didn't stop.

With a painful grunt, he leapt off the roof—straight into the chaotic streets below.

Caldrek hit the ground hard, rolling through the filth of Shackle Row's backstreets. Pain flared in his ribs—Mordrak had damn near broken them—but there was no time to assess the damage. He staggered to his feet, blood dripping from his lip, and pulled Eryndil up beside him.

The streets were a riot of flickering lanterns and confusion. The alley smelled of rotting meat, piss, and damp stone, and the air was thick with the stink of wood smoke from nearby forges. Somewhere deeper in the slums, a pair of drunken beggars argued over a bottle, oblivious to the fact that Blackreach's most dangerous enforcer was tearing through the district like a storm.

“Caldrek Blackthane! Show yourself, you rat-blooded bastard!” Mordrak's voice boomed behind them, too damn close.

Caldrek bolted. He tore through the alley, skidding over loose cobblestones, Eryndil stumbling in his wake. The elf was injured, slowing them down, but Caldrek refused to die on these streets. Not tonight.

The sound of pursuing boots thundered after them. Mordrak was not alone anymore. More guards—mercenaries, city watch, maybe even the Queen's enforcers—were closing in.

Caldrek spotted a rusted sewer grate near a collapsed building. Perfect.

He yanked a pry bar from his belt, jammed it into the grate, and wrenched. The metal screamed as it gave way. The stench of mildew, rot, shit and stagnant water hit him full in the face, but he didn't hesitate. “Down!” he ordered Eryndil.

The elf grimaced but obeyed, dropping into the black, reeking hole beneath the city. Caldrek followed, pulling the grate back into place just as shadows spilled into the alley above.

He barely had time to breathe before he felt something shift in the darkness behind him.

The sewers weren't empty. And now, they weren't alone. The sewer tunnels twisted like a rotting corpse's veins, damp and reeking of mold, rust, and stagnant filth. Caldrek's boots squelched through ankle-deep muck, and every step sent rats skittering into the dark. The

walls, slick with moisture, were cracked and covered in old, illegible thieves' markings, long-forgotten by the men who had carved them.

Something moved behind them. Eryndil tensed. "I don't like this place." Caldrek gritted his teeth and pushed forward. "Nobody does."

They trudged deeper until they reached a rusted iron gate, half hidden behind a broken stone archway. Caldrek rapped his knuckles twice against the metal before gripping the bottom bar and pulling inward. The gate groaned open, revealing a hidden passage leading to a dry section of the tunnels.

At the end of the corridor, a flickering lantern cast jagged shadows over a wooden door. Caldrek didn't bother knocking. He shoved it open.

Inside, Velka Blackthane—his younger sister and the only person in Blackreach who could match his cunning—sat atop a wooden crate, boots propped on a broken table. She was smoking from a long-stemmed pipe, her fingers idly flipping a gold coin she'd definitely stolen.

A few of her cutthroats lounged in the shadows, weapons visible but not yet drawn. They were watching. Always watching. Velka glanced up lazily, took in Caldrek's soaked, bloodied form, then Eryndil's half-dead state, and smiled.

"Gods, brother, I knew you were getting sloppy, but this? This is pathetic." Caldrek slammed the ledger onto the table, ignoring the stab of pain in his ribs. Velka raised an eyebrow. "That's a good start. Where's the gold?"

"No gold. Just names."

Her smile faded slightly. She leaned forward, her keen thief's eyes scanning him for lies. One of her men—a lanky rogue with too many scars and not enough brains—chuckled. "So what you're saying is, you got yourself a bounty on your head for a damn book?"

Caldrek's temper flared, but before he could speak, Velka beat him to it. "Oh, he did more than that." She tapped the latest bounty notice on the wall, freshly posted. Caldrek's face stared back at him.

WANTED: CALDREK BLACKTHANE. THIEF. TRAITOR. REWARD: 5,000 GOLD.

Velka exhaled a slow plume of smoke, grinning like a wolf. "Tell me, brother—do you ever get tired of being this godsdamned predictable?"

No Rest for the Wicked

Caldrek hated getting patched up. Not because of the pain—he could handle that. It was the damn lecturing that came with it. Brunna Blackthane, his other sister, had made sure of that.

Her apothecary in Cinder Hollow was small, cluttered, and reeked of medicinal herbs, burnt tallow, and stale ale. Bundles of dried plants hung from the rafters, and every surface was covered with half-filled tinctures, pestles, and makeshift bandages. The whole place looked more like a battlefield aid station than a proper healer's shop.

Caldrek sat on a rickety wooden chair, shirtless, his ribs bruised black and purple from Mordrak's earlier beating. Brunna worked with quick, precise fingers, threading a needle through his torn flesh with a skill that came from years of treating thieves and mercenaries too stubborn to die.

She didn't bother numbing the wound first. Because she was Brunna. "You're a godsdamned idiot, you know that?" she muttered, tightening the stitch. Caldrek grunted but didn't flinch. "I've heard."

"You should hear it more. Maybe then you'd stop getting yourself beaten half to the hells." She pulled the thread tight, and Caldrek winced despite himself. Eryndil, still looking like he'd lost a fight with a bear, sat in the corner, smiling as he sipped a weak herbal brew Brunna had shoved into his hands. "I like her. She's blunt."

Brunna shot him a glare. "And you—why the hells is my brother dragging around a half-dead elf noble?" Caldrek sighed. "It's complicated."

Brunna snorted. "Everything with you is complicated." She snipped the thread and shoved a jar of salve into his hands. "Rub that on the stitches twice a day. If they get infected, don't come crying to me when your insides rot out."

"Ever the gentle touch."

She crossed her arms. "You're my brother. I'm required to keep you alive. But that doesn't mean I have to be nice about it." Caldrek stood carefully, flexing his sore ribs. "Right. Now that I'm not bleeding out, I need a drink."

Brunna rolled her eyes. "What you need is a plan. Because the Queen's bounty hunters? They won't stop coming." Caldrek grabbed his shirt, pulling it over his head. "Yeah, yeah. I'm working on it." Brunna didn't look convinced. And, truth be told, neither was he.

Caldrek watched as Eryndil stretched his sore limbs, rolling his shoulders with a quiet groan. The elf looked less like a dying man and more like a soldier who'd been put through hell but refused to break. Brunna's remedies had done their job—the bruises were still there, but the feverish pallor had faded.

Eryndil set down his now-empty cup of Brunna's foul-smelling herbal brew and fixed Caldrek with a steady gaze. "So, are you ready to hear exactly how deep into the pit you've thrown yourself?" Caldrek scoffed, leaning against the wooden counter, arms crossed. "If I wasn't, I wouldn't be here. Spill it, elf."

Eryndil exhaled slowly, tapping his fingers against the rough wooden table. "The ledger you stole from Lord Veyne isn't just records of debts or trade agreements. It's a list of names."

Caldrek narrowed his eyes. "Names of who?" Eryndil met his gaze. "People the Queen wants dead." The room went quiet. Even Brunna, who had been stirring something in a mortar, froze.

Caldrek's fingers tightened around the edge of the counter. "You're saying I didn't just rob some pompous noble—I stole the damn Queen's personal kill list?" Eryndil nodded. "And trust me, she won't let it go."

Caldrek exhaled sharply. *No wonder Veyne had a cage in his study.* The elf had been locked away because he wasn't just another target—he must have known too much. Brunna was frowning now, rubbing her temples. "And what exactly did you do to end up on that list, elf?"

Eryndil smiled, though there was little humor in it. "I exist. The Queen doesn't like independent elven diplomacy. She prefers her treaties written in blood." He tapped the table. "And those names in that book? They aren't just criminals and traitors."

Caldrek already knew what was coming. And he didn't like it.

"They're nobles. Merchants. Council members." Eryndil's voice dropped lower. "Even loyalists to the King."

Brunna let out a slow curse. Caldrek pinched the bridge of his nose. This was bad. Really bad. "Let me guess, you think we should do something about it?" Eryndil leaned forward, eyes sharp. "I think you're already too deep to back out. The question is—how much are you willing to risk?"

Caldrek hated to admit it, but the elf had a point. The Queen wanted that ledger buried—and anyone who had seen it buried with it.

And now? That meant him. Caldrek wasn't surprised when he walked out of Brunna's shop and found two knives pointed at his ribs.

"Evening, boys," he muttered, not breaking stride. The two thugs didn't move, their blades steady and unamused. One was a scar-faced half-elf with dead eyes, the other a hulking brute who looked like he chewed nails for fun.

Caldrek sighed. "This about money, or are we just doing the usual intimidation dance?"

A familiar voice cut through the damp air, smooth as silk, sharp as glass. "Caldrek, Caldrek, Caldrek." Veyra Dravenn stepped out of the alleyway shadows, arms folded, expression somewhere between amusement and exasperation. Caldrek knew that look. It meant trouble.

Veyra was lean, deadly, and dressed in midnight leathers, her auburn hair pulled into a loose knot, framing a face that could charm a merchant and slit his throat in the same breath. The leader of the Velvet Knives—and one of the few people in Blackreach more dangerous than she looked.

She tilted her head, studying him. "You've been busy." Caldrek forced a smile. "You know me. Can't sit still."

“Oh, I know.” Veyra took a slow step closer. “I also know you pulled a job in Goldcourt. A big one. And yet, I don’t recall you running it through me.”

Caldrek shrugged. “Must’ve slipped my mind.” Veyra’s smile didn’t reach her eyes. “That’s funny, because your mistakes tend to be expensive. And I hate expensive mistakes.”

Caldrek exhaled. There it was. Veyra always got her cut—either in coin or in blood.

“So let’s make this easy, love,” she continued. “Hand over half of whatever you stole, and I’ll consider letting you keep breathing.” Caldrek resisted the urge to curse. Veyra had no idea what he’d really taken.

A ledger full of names the Queen wanted erased wasn’t exactly something he could break into gold and split evenly. He forced a smile. “Bit of a problem there. Didn’t steal gold. Stole something worse.”

Veyra raised an eyebrow. “Worse? I don’t like vague answers.” Caldrek hesitated. He could lie. Could try to spin this into something smaller. But Veyra wasn’t stupid. And if she found out later that he’d kept something this big from her, she’d be far less merciful.

“It’s a hit list, Veyra. The Queen’s.” For the first time, she actually looked surprised. Then, her expression shifted. Not to fear. To something worse. Intrigue. She leaned in, voice low. “Well, now you’ve got my attention.”

Caldrek watched Veyra carefully. She was good at hiding her thoughts, but he caught the flicker of calculating interest behind her sharp gaze. The Velvet Knives didn’t just deal in coin—they dealt in power. And knowing who the Queen wanted dead? That was leverage worth more than gold. Which meant she wasn’t just going to let him walk away with it.

“Alright, let’s not kill each other just yet,” Caldrek said, rolling his shoulders. His ribs still screamed from Mordrak’s earlier beating, but he ignored it. “I’ve got a better deal.”

Veyra crossed her arms. “It had better be good.” Caldrek paused for effect, then grinned. “The ledger isn’t the only thing I can steal.” Veyra’s eyes narrowed. Caldrek took a slow step forward, lowering his voice. “You ever heard of the Bloodseal?”

A flicker of recognition crossed her face, but she masked it quickly. “Old tomb legend. Supposedly cursed. What of it?”

“It’s real.” Caldrek let the words hang between them. “And I can get it. You want power? That relic’s worth ten times what’s in this book.” Veyra tapped a finger against her lip, pretending to consider. “And let me guess—you just need a little help getting it?”

Caldrek shrugged. “I need a crew. Someone who knows the old tombs, someone who can keep me from getting stabbed in the back.”

Veyra smiled like a cat that had just cornered a mouse. “And let me guess again—you’re thinking of Velka.”

Caldrek sighed. He hated it when she was two steps ahead of him.

Veyra gestured to her men. "Well then. Let's go see what your dear sister thinks about all this."

Velka laughed so hard she nearly fell off her chair. "You?! Going after the Bloodseal?!" She wiped a tear from her eye. "Oh, this is rich. Have you completely lost your mind, brother?"

Caldrek waited as she caught her breath, arms crossed, not amused. Veyra, lounging nearby, smiled at the whole exchange. Velka finally exhaled and leaned forward, still grinning. "Let me guess. You need me to do all the hard work while you waltz in and take the glory?"

"I need a guide. And someone to watch my back," Caldrek corrected. Velka's grin widened. "And what do I get out of this?" Caldrek already knew the answer. "You want in on the ledger. Fine. I'll give you a look at it."

Veyra tilted her head, intrigued, but said nothing. Velka leaned back, stretching. "Tempting, tempting. But you're forgetting something, dear brother."

Caldrek's patience thinned. "Which is?" Velka's smile turned sharp. "I don't work for free. You want my help? You owe me. Big." Caldrek sighed.

"Fine. You name it."

Velka leaned forward, grinning like a woman who had just won a high-stakes card game. "Don't worry. I will."

"If you're actually going after that thing, there's someone else who'll want to talk to you first," she said.

Caldrek frowned. "Who?"

"Malachi Vespers," she said simply.

Caldrek groaned. Of course.

Velka smiled, but there was something uneasy about it. "Ratlord's been obsessed with the Bloodseal for years. Claims it belongs to the forgotten dead of Blackreach. If he hears you're even thinking about touching it, he'll want his cut."

Veyra, still lounging but now far more interested, turned her gaze to Velka. "And what exactly does a corpse collector like Ratlord want with an old dwarven relic?"

Velka shrugged. "Why don't you ask him yourself? He'll probably come looking for you soon enough."

Caldrek ground his teeth, already regretting the entire conversation. Of course Ratlord would stick his bony fingers into this mess. He always did.

A Debt to the Ratlord

The Undermaze was where Blackreach's lost things ended up. Forgotten tunnels, crumbling crypts, old sewer lines leading nowhere—it was a place where the city's dead whispered in the dark, and where those who lived among them were only half-alive themselves.

Caldrek walked cautiously through the filth-stained passage, his boots splashing through shallow pools of murky water. Rats skittered along the stone ledges, watching him with beady, knowing eyes.

Up ahead, a single iron lantern flickered weakly, casting shadows against the damp, mold-ridden walls. Beneath it, seated on a throne of rotting crates and scavenged bones, was Malachi "Ratlord" Vespers.

He looked like a corpse pretending to be a man—thin, sickly, his flesh stretched tight over his skull, his skin gray and peeling in places, as if it had forgotten how to stay attached. His bony fingers drummed idly against the arm of his makeshift throne, and when he smiled, his rotting teeth gleamed yellow in the low light.

"Caldrek Blackthane," he rasped, his voice dry as old parchment. "Always crawling back into the dark where you belong."

Caldrek stopped a few paces away, arms crossed, not wanting to get too close. He had no love for Malachi, but he respected him—the kind of respect one gave a venomous snake.

"You heard," Caldrek said flatly.

Malachi's grin widened, showing more teeth than should have fit in his mouth. "I hear everything, little thief. And I hear you're chasing old ghosts."

Caldrek grunted. "The Bloodseal."

Malachi's bony fingers tightened on the armrest, the playfulness in his expression flickering into something colder.

"It does not belong to you," he whispered. "It does not belong to the Queen, or the King, or any living hands. It belongs to the forgotten. To us."

Caldrek narrowed his eyes. "You mean the dead?"

Malachi's chuckle was like wind through dry bones. "What else would I mean?"

Caldrek had half a mind to tell him to crawl back into his hole, but he was out of options. If he wanted to reach the Tomb of the Unhallowed, he needed safe passage through the Undermaze—and that meant dealing with Ratlord.

He sighed. "Fine. I get you the Bloodseal. You let me pass through your tunnels without trouble."

Malachi studied him, his sunken eyes glittering with something unnatural. Then, slowly, he nodded.

"A deal is struck," he murmured, his voice thick with amusement.

Caldrek turned to go, but Malachi's voice followed him, low and knowing.

"But be warned, thief. The dead do not give up their treasures easily."

Caldrek didn't turn back. He just kept walking. Of course they didn't. Nothing ever came easy. The tunnels of the Undermaze were never still.

Caldrek and Velka moved carefully, their footsteps barely making a sound against the damp stone floor. The air was thick with the stench of mold, decay, and something older, something wrong. Water dripped from unseen cracks above, each drop echoing like a whisper through the tunnels. But there were other whispers too—ones that didn't come from the water.

Velka, walking just behind him, exhaled sharply, her voice low. "Should've just slit Malachi's throat and called it a day."

Caldrek shot her a look but didn't respond. His instincts were prickling. Something felt... off. They seemed to be lost on their way back.

The tunnels twisted unnaturally, the stone walls slick and uneven, carved by hands that had long since turned to dust. Old wooden support beams stood in places, but they were cracked, bowing under the weight of centuries, as if the tunnels themselves were sagging under the pressure of all the dead who had walked them.

And then they reached the warning.

Rows of skeletal remains, nailed to the tunnel walls by rusted iron spikes. Their bones were wrapped in the tattered remains of thieves' leathers, their skulls tilted downward, as if they had been frozen mid-plea.

Velka stopped beside him, staring up at the remains. Her mouth twisted into a smile, but there was no humor in it.

"Well, that's subtle," she muttered.

Caldrek ignored her, his grip tightening on the hilt of his dagger. The whispers were growing louder now.

Not words. Not voices. Something else.

He turned his head slightly, listening. The sound came from deeper within the tunnels—a soft, shuffling movement, the sound of something wet dragging across stone.

Velka had noticed it too.

Her hand drifted toward her belt, her fingers brushing the hilt of her own blade. Caldrek didn't speak, just lifted a hand in a silent warning. They weren't alone down here. The whispers deepened, shifting from faint murmurs into something more insidious. They weren't words, not truly—just fragments of things remembered, things lost.

Caldrek slowed his steps. The air had changed.

Velka felt it too. She turned her head slightly, her hand now fully gripping the hilt of her dagger. Then, the shadows moved.

Figures crawled from the alcoves, from drain pipes, from places they should not have fit. Their bodies were gaunt and withered, wrapped in the same tattered leathers as the corpses nailed to the tunnel walls. But their mouths—

Their mouths were stitched shut with black thread, the flesh around the sutures torn and frayed as if they had tried to scream and failed.

The Hollowborn. Velka inhaled sharply. "Shit." Caldrek didn't speak. He couldn't. Because one of them tilted its head toward him, and the whisper in his skull changed. It wasn't just noise anymore. It was a voice. A voice he knew. *"Caldrek..."*

The thief went rigid. The rasping voice wasn't his own thoughts, wasn't Velka's. It was his grandfather's voice. *"Caldrek, boy... you should've stayed in the forge."*

His grip on his dagger tightened, his heartbeat hammering against his ribs. Then they moved. Too fast. One of the Hollowborn lunged, its clawed fingers slicing through empty air as Caldrek barely stepped back in time. Another snatched at Velka, its bony fingers catching the edge of her hood and yanking it away, exposing her bare throat.

She swore, twisting, but the thing's grip was iron-hard. Caldrek acted on instinct. He lunged forward, grabbing Velka's arm and yanking her back just as the creature's claws raked through the space her neck had been.

Velka staggered, breathing hard. "Tell me you have a plan." Caldrek didn't have one. Not yet. But he knew one thing—they couldn't let these things get close. The Hollowborn swarmed.

Caldrek barely had time to react before one of them lunged at Velka, tackling her into the muck of the tunnel floor. The thing was stronger than it should have been, its rotting fingers digging into her arms, its bony, stitched-shut mouth snapping like a starving wolf.

Velka fought like a rabid animal, but she couldn't stop what came next. The Hollowborn's jaws clamped down on the side of her head. She let out a raw, agonized scream as the thing ripped a jagged chunk from the top of her ear. Blood splattered against the tunnel wall, dark in the dim lantern light. Caldrek saw red.

He lunged forward, grabbing the creature by the back of its skull, his grip iron-hard. With a roar of fury, he slammed its face into the stone wall—once, twice, three times—until bone cracked and black ichor smeared the surface.

The thing went limp, its body twitching as it slid to the ground. His hand brushed something cold and heavy around its neck. Without thinking, he pulled a tarnished necklace from it, the dark runes etched into the metal glowing faintly in the dim light and pocketed it quickly.

Velka was still standing, but blood streamed down her neck, staining her collar. Her breath came in sharp gasps, pain twisting her features, but her eyes burned with pure rage. With a growl, she yanked her poisoned shiv from her belt and stabbed wildly, driving the blade into the ribcage of another Hollowborn. It twitched violently, clawing at its own chest as the venom did its work, blackening its already-rotten flesh.

Caldrek knew they couldn't fight them all like this. They needed a way to finish this fast. His eyes snapped to his satchel. Without hesitation, he grabbed a glass bottle of oil, flicked open his flint striker, and ignited it. "Back! Now!"

Velka barely had time to react before he hurled the flaming bottle at the tunnel floor. The oil exploded into a wall of fire, rushing up the damp stone like a beast set free. The Hollowborn let out inhuman, ear-splitting shrieks as the flames crawled up their bodies, licking at their rotting flesh. They twisted, flailed, and collapsed one by one, their bodies turning to blackened husks in the heat.

The tunnel filled with the stench of burning meat and decay. Caldrek grabbed Velka, pulling her away before the fire spread too far. Her fingers were pressed to the side of her head, trying to slow the steady stream of blood from her missing ear. She let out a shaky breath, gritting her teeth. "That was my favorite damn ear."

Caldrek half-laughed, half-coughed. "You've still got one. Try not to lose it too."

She glared at him. "Get me out of here before I stab you."

Caldrek grabbed her arm, and they ran, the flames roaring behind them.

Caldrek and Velka staggered through the tunnels, lungs burning, boots splashing through the filth-streaked water. The fire raged behind them, its orange glow flickering along the damp stone walls, casting dancing shadows that seemed far too eager to follow.

Velka clutched the ruined side of her head, blood seeping through her fingers. Her breathing was ragged and uneven, but her fury was alive and well. "This is your fault, you absolute bastard," she hissed.

Caldrek grunted, dragging her forward. "Yeah, yeah, you can punch me later. Keep moving." The tunnel ahead curved sharply, and they rounded the bend—only to find Malachi Vespers waiting for them.

He stood at the tunnel's exit, untouched by the chaos they had barely escaped. The dim lantern light cast deep shadows over his skeletal features, and his grinning, corpse-like face stretched wider as he took them in.

"What a sight," Malachi mused, tilting his head like an amused vulture. His gaze flicked to Velka's mutilated ear, and he chuckled, low and rasping. "Did the dead take their due, little thief?"

Velka spat on the ground, ignoring the fresh pain that shot through her skull. "Laugh it up, ghoul. One day someone's going to put a blade through your throat."

Malachi's grin didn't waver. "Perhaps. But it won't be today." His cold, black eyes locked onto Caldrek, and his tone shifted, becoming almost... hungry. "You stole more than gold tonight, Blackthane."

Caldrek frowned. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Malachi took a slow step forward, his presence somehow more suffocating than the smoke behind them. "You stole from the dead. And they do not forget. Not in this city."

Caldrek felt a chill skitter down his spine, but he masked it with a scowl. "I burned some walking corpses. They should've stayed in the dirt." Malachi laughed softly, shaking his head. "Oh, but you see... now they know you."

Caldrek felt it before he saw it. A shift. A wrongness. His eyes darted to the ground. His shadow was moving. Not flickering in the firelight. Not stretching naturally with his stance. It twitched. It curled at the edges, slow and deliberate, as if aware that it was being watched. For the first time in a long while, Caldrek felt something close to fear.

Malachi, still grinning, took a step back into the darkness. His voice was a whisper of a promise. "They'll come for you soon enough."

Then he was gone.

Caldrek clenched his jaw, forcing himself to look away from his own shadow. He grabbed Velka's arm, ignoring the way his fingers felt just a little colder than before. "Come on. We need to get the hell out of here." Velka didn't argue. This time, she felt it too.

Lust & Lies

Caldrek needed a drink. Or a knife fight. Maybe both.

His ribs still ached from Mordrak's fists, his lungs burned from the Hollowborn's foul air, and his mind wouldn't stop replaying Malachi's last words. His own shadow had moved on its own. That wasn't normal. That wasn't something he could ignore. So he didn't.

Instead, he found himself walking through the winding streets of Brass Quarter, boots dragging through the rain-slick filth of Blackreach. The city's stench of sweat, metal, and stale ale clung to the air, but his thoughts were elsewhere. He needed somewhere to lie low. Somewhere he wouldn't wake up with a knife in his gut.

Which was exactly why he shouldn't have gone to Veyra Dravenn. But here he was, pushing open the door to her hideout above the Silk Alley gaming dens.

The room was dimly lit, the smell of cheap wine, expensive perfume, and bad decisions hanging thick in the air. Veyra lounged in a battered leather chair by the fireplace, a half-full bottle of red liquor dangling from her fingers. She looked up lazily, eyes gleaming in the firelight.

"Gods, you look like you got trampled by a drunken mule," she mused, taking a slow sip. Caldrek grunted, kicking the door shut behind him. "Pretty close." Veyra grinned but didn't get up. "What is it this time? Got yourself cursed? Betrayed? Just a little stabbing, or did you make someone really mad?"

"Yes," Caldrek muttered, collapsing onto the couch opposite her. He stretched out his legs, exhaling slowly, letting the exhaustion settle in. Veyra watched him for a long moment, swirling the liquor in her glass. Then she leaned forward, smiling.

"Should I be worried that you always crawl back here when you're bleeding?" Caldrek opened one eye, matching her gaze. "If it makes you feel important, sure."

Her laugh was low and husky, amusement laced with something sharper. "Careful. You keep talking like that, and I might think you actually missed me." He didn't answer.

Because that was the problem with Veyra. He did. Not in the way a man misses a lost love. That wasn't what they had. It was something darker, more tangled—a habit neither of them wanted to break.

Veyra tilted her head, considering him, then poured another drink. "Well, you're here, which means you either want something or you're feeling reckless." She leaned over, pressing the bottle into his hands, her fingers brushing his briefly.

"Which is it?" she asked. Caldrek took a slow sip, letting the burn settle in his throat. "Both," he admitted. Veyra's smile widened. And just like that, old habits took over. It started the way it always did. A few more drinks. A few more insults, traded with the kind of ease that only came from knowing someone too well. Her legs draped over his lap at some point, fingers absently tracing a scar on his forearm as they talked, pretending they weren't already past the point of no return.

And then—the shift. The way her eyes darkened just slightly. The way her fingers lingered longer than necessary. The way Caldrek didn't move away. Veyra leaned in, the smell of wine and smoke on her breath, her voice nothing more than a whisper.

"You're a bastard," she murmured against his jaw. Caldrek smiled. "So are you." And then—the inevitable. The heat. The pull. The push and drag of old familiarity. A night that would end like it always did—half passion, half violence, and a mess to clean up in the morning.

Caldrek knew this was a mistake. But right now? He didn't care.

The room was thick with heat and liquor, the glow of the dying fire casting shifting shadows across tangled sheets. Caldrek lay on his back, breath heavy, his skin still slick with sweat.

Veyra draped herself across him, her bare skin warm against his, the smell of wine and mischief still clinging to the air. She traced idle patterns on his chest, fingers featherlight, nails just barely scraping the surface. Caldrek smiled, half-lidded eyes watching her. "That content look of yours always makes me nervous."

Veyra chuckled, pressing a lazy kiss against his jaw. "Maybe I'm just enjoying myself." "Maybe," Caldrek murmured. But something felt off. It wasn't the usual post-lust satisfaction. It was something... calculated.

Her fingers moved lower, not toward him, but toward his belt pouch, barely visible beneath the sheets. Caldrek caught the flicker of steel. A flash of something small and sharp, barely a whisper against the candlelight—a thief's tool, delicate as a spider's leg.

Veyra wasn't just tracing his skin. She was picking a damn lock. Caldrek moved before she could react. In a blink, his dagger was in his hand, and with a sharp twist, he pinned her wrist to the mattress. Veyra let out a small, surprised gasp, but it wasn't one of pain.

It was amusement. She tilted her head, lips curling into a slow smile, her wrist still trapped beneath the cold edge of his blade. "Caught me, love," she purred, eyes wicked and unreadable.

Caldrek exhaled through his nose, more annoyed than angry. "You really thought I wouldn't notice?" Veyra just smiled. "I thought you'd notice a little later." Her free hand trailed along his stomach, teasing, playing innocent.

"Come on," she whispered, voice low and syrup-sweet. "You and I both know this is just how we are. Lying, stealing, using each other. It's practically romantic."

Caldrek didn't loosen his grip. Beneath her playful mask, he could see it—the calculation. The way she was testing his reaction, waiting to see if he'd let her talk her way out of it.

But this wasn't some harmless tavern con. This was the ledger. This was his life on the line. "Give me one good reason I shouldn't take that hand off," he muttered. Veyra's smile didn't fade. If anything, it widened. "Because you still want to use me as much as I want to use you."

Caldrek stared at her, blade unmoving. Damn her. She wasn't wrong.

The room was silent, save for the crackle of dying embers in the fireplace and the steady rhythm of two thieves daring the other to blink first.

Veyra lay beneath Caldrek, her wrist still pinned by his dagger, her bare skin slick with sweat, her breath steady—too steady for someone caught red-handed.

She didn't squirm. She didn't beg. She just smiled, green eyes gleaming with something dangerous and amused.

"Well, this is new," she murmured, tilting her head slightly against the pillow, her free hand trailing up his arm, lazy and teasing. "Usually, we don't get to the knives until morning."

Caldrek didn't move. His blade shifted instead, trailing from her wrist to her throat, the steel cool against the flushed heat of her skin.

Veyra didn't flinch. Her pulse beat steady against the edge of his knife. "Why the ledger?" Caldrek asked, his voice low, rough. Veyra licked her lips, watching him like a cat watching a cornered mouse. "I don't know, love," she whispered. "Why do I do anything?"

Caldrek pressed the blade harder, just enough for her to feel it. Enough to remind her that he wasn't playing. Veyra sighed, exasperated. "You really are no fun."

He said nothing. Just watched her. Waited. And then she laughed. A soft, husky thing, throaty and full of secrets. "What, you thought this was just about lust?" she whispered, shifting beneath him, her fingers now lightly tracing the scar across his collarbone.

Caldrek's jaw tightened. Of course not. With Veyra, it was never just one thing. She never did anything for just one reason. And that meant this was worse than he thought. Veyra didn't look afraid. That was what made Caldrek nervous.

Most people would have been sweating with a blade to their throat, especially after being caught trying to steal from the wrong man. But she just smiled, her bare skin warm beneath him, her body shifting lazily as if this was all part of some elaborate game.

And maybe to her, it was.

"Let's not do anything drastic," she purred, tilting her head just enough to let the blade slide against the curve of her neck. "You don't want to kill me. That would just be messy. And besides—" Her fingers trailed up his arm again, slow, knowing. "—you need me."

Caldrek narrowed his eyes. "For what?"

"For staying alive." She let the words hang between them, watching the realization settle over his face. Caldrek didn't move the dagger. "Explain. Quickly."

Veyra sighed, feigning disappointment. "Fine, fine. I was going to make it fun, but here's the short version, love—the Queen already knows your name." Caldrek's stomach tightened.

Veyra grinned at the reaction. "That little job of yours? Lord Veyne's estate? That ledger you're clutching so tightly? Word travels fast when it involves the Queen's kill list. You're not just some anonymous rat in the gutter anymore. You're a problem. And Mordrak?"

She let out a low, amused hum, shifting slightly under him. "He's on his way to solve you."

Caldrek exhaled sharply. He had figured as much, but hearing it confirmed—he was in deeper than he thought. Veyra continued, her voice turning softer, more coaxing. "So here's what we're going to do. You let me in on this little game, and I won't take the ledger. In fact, I might even help you stay alive long enough to use it."

Caldrek studied her, measuring the risk. She was a liar. A thief. A killer when she needed to be. But she wasn't wrong.

He had too many enemies closing in, and right now, he needed every advantage he could get. Just as he was about to respond, the door burst open with a loud, frustrated kick. Velka strode in, bleeding from her ruined ear, one hand clutching a rag soaked in blood, the other pointing accusingly at Caldrek.

"If you're screwing right now, I'm going to kill you." Veyra grinned, unbothered. "Oh, sister dearest. I was just talking business." Velka rolled her eyes so hard it looked painful. She looked at Caldrek, her expression somewhere between exhaustion and complete exasperation.

"You're bleeding, I'm bleeding, the whole damn city is hunting us, and you're still finding time to roll around with this viper?" Caldrek sat back, finally removing the knife from Veyra's throat.

"Not exactly how I planned my night," he muttered. Velka muttered something under her breath, something deeply unkind about dwarves and their priorities.

Veyra grinned up at her. "Jealous?" Velka threw the bloody rag at her face. "Put some clothes on. We've got work to do."

Caldrek tugged on his shirt, wincing as the fabric brushed against his bruised ribs. Velka was still muttering curses in the other room, probably digging through his stash for something strong enough to numb the pain of her half-missing ear.

Veyra, however, hadn't moved.

She was still sprawled across the bed, half-naked, utterly unbothered, one arm draped behind her head, the other idly swirling the last bit of wine in her glass. The firelight danced across her skin, giving her an almost lazy, feline grace.

Caldrek knew better. Nothing about Veyra was ever truly lazy. She watched him as he buckled his belt, adjusted his satchel, checked that the ledger was still safely tucked away.

He could feel her gaze trailing over him, sharp and assessing. He glanced at her. "Enjoying the view?"

Veyra smiled, sipping her wine. "Always."

Caldrek snorted, sliding his daggers back into place. "Don't get used to it."

"Oh, I never do," she mused, setting her glass down.

She propped herself up on one elbow, tilting her head, her expression shifting—something thoughtful lurking beneath the usual teasing. "You know, " she said, her voice just a little too soft, "You're playing a game you can't win."

Caldrek paused, glancing at her.

Veyra smiled, but this time, it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Just make sure," she murmured, "that you don't lose too beautifully."

Caldrek held her gaze for a second longer than he meant to. Then he pulled up his hood and walked out.

Velka fell into step beside him in the hallway, still pressing a cloth to her ear. She shot him a sideways look, shaking her head. "She's gonna gut you one day, you know that, right?"

Caldrek exhaled, rolling his shoulders. "Probably."

Into the Tomb

The ruined temple of Old Braxford loomed before them, its crumbling stone walls covered in creeping ivy, its once-grand archways now half-buried in centuries of neglect and rot. It was just another forgotten entrance to the city's vast tunnel system, a dark and winding passage that led deeper into the Undermaze

Caldrek adjusted his satchel, glancing up at the faded carvings above the entrance. The figures were worn down by time, but he could still make out the shapes of hooded priests, hands raised in worship—or maybe in warning.

Velka stood beside him, arms crossed, her bandaged ear still crusted with dried blood. She had been silent most of the trip, which, for Velka, meant she was still bitter as hell.

Eryndil, ever the outsider, stood a few paces away, gazing up at the temple with a distant, almost reverent expression. His silver hair was pulled back in a simple knot, his noble robes now dirtied from travel, but his presence still carried that effortless elven grace that irritated Caldrek more than he cared to admit.

Eryndil exhaled, his fingers tracing the elven runes faintly etched into the stone.

"This place should not be disturbed," he murmured, voice low, distant.

Caldrek snorted, stepping forward. "Yeah? Tell that to the people trying to kill us if we don't."

Velka gave a humorless chuckle. "Or the people trying to kill us even if we do."

Eryndil ignored them both. His hand lingered against the stone for a moment longer before he whispered something in his own tongue. A prayer, maybe.

Caldrek rolled his eyes. "Great. Now the ghosts will know we're here."

Eryndil didn't reply.

Because at that moment, the tomb doors groaned. The deep rumbling of stone against stone echoed through the ruins as the heavy doors slowly began to part, the dust of ages past spilling into the night air. Beyond them, the entrance yawned open—dark, silent, waiting.

Velka exhaled through her nose, muttering. "This is a bad idea."

Caldrek smiled, stepping forward. "Always is."

And with that, they entered the Tomb of the Unhallowed.

The air inside the tomb was thick with dust and silence, the kind that hadn't been broken in centuries. Their footsteps echoed against the stone floor, their breath shallow as they moved deeper into the darkness.

The passage ahead widened into a vast chamber, its floor covered in fractured tiles, some sunken with age. The walls were lined with faded murals of hooded figures, their skeletal hands pressed together in prayer, their faces long since worn away.

Caldrek ran a gloved hand along the stone, muttering under his breath. "Place is too quiet." Velka, beside him, let out a harsh exhale, shifting uncomfortably. "I don't like this." Eryndil barely breathed, his sharp elven eyes scanning the surroundings. "Neither do I."

That was the only warning they got. With a thunderous slam, the walls shifted. Stone ground against stone, and suddenly, the walls to either side lurched forward, moving fast—too fast.

"Move!" Caldrek roared.

They sprinted forward, feet slamming against the dusty floor as the massive slabs of stone crashed together just behind them. The force of it sent a gust of ancient air rushing forward, the smell of rot and old death filling their noses.

Velka, ahead of him, barely made it through before the next section jerked into motion, the floor shifting beneath them. The walls weren't the only danger. Caldrek caught the faintest hiss of air before something whistled past his face. A poisoned dart, thin and rusted, embedded itself in the stone beside him. Another came a second later, slashing across his cheek.

A burning sensation bloomed immediately, spreading through his skin like fire racing through dry grass. "Damn it!" he hissed, grabbing Velka by the collar and yanking her forward as another barrage of darts rained from the ceiling.

Eryndil moved with unnatural elven speed, dodging with effortless grace, but Velka— Her foot hit something loose. The floor beneath her gave way. With a sharp cry, she dropped, hands scrambling for purchase as a gaping pit of spiked bones yawned below her. Caldrek didn't think. He lunged, grabbing her wrist just as her boots kicked against the jagged remains below.

Velka gritted her teeth, eyes wild. "If you drop me, I'm haunting you!"

"Shut up and climb!"

She swung a leg up, hooking it against the crumbling edge. With a grunt, she pulled herself up, rolling onto solid ground just as another set of darts whistled past them.

Caldrek panted, wiping blood from his cheek. The burning sensation was spreading, but he'd deal with it later. Velka sat up, glaring at him. "I really hate this tomb."

Caldrek exhaled. "Yeah. And we haven't even found the damn Bloodseal yet."

The tunnel ahead beckoned—dark, waiting, and undoubtedly full of worse things than traps. The air grew thick and stale, as if it had been locked away for centuries, untouched by the light of day. The walls narrowed, their once-pristine stone now slick with a layer of moss and grime that seemed to whisper with the weight of forgotten memories.

The deeper they ventured, the more the atmosphere shifted. The very earth seemed to pulse with something unnatural—heavy, as if the tunnel itself was breathing. They moved cautiously, keeping their steps light as they passed through the remnants of what might have once been a place of worship, now nothing more than a crypt in the dark.

The chamber loomed ahead, vast and swallowed in shadows, its ancient stonework choked with dust and time. Unlike the rest of the tomb, this place felt different. Older. Hungrier.

The walls of the chamber were lined with the remains of ancient statues, their faces eroded by centuries of neglect, their stone eyes blank but still carrying a hint of something that might have been alive once. The air seemed to hum with something that pulled at the edges of sanity, an ancient force that had slumbered long enough to thirst for something new.

Then they heard it. A shuffle, followed by a sickening wet drag. Velka's hand immediately went to her dagger, but Caldrek's eyes widened in realization.

"We're not alone."

Before anyone could respond, the ground seemed to split open, and from the depths of the shadows, they emerged.

Their bodies were gaunt, skeletal forms wrapped in the tatters of old, rotting leather and rusted chainmail. Their limbs were unnaturally long, bony fingers curling like claws, grasping weapons from ages past—rusted swords, dull axes, and tattered shields. But their faces—their faces were the worst part.

Eyes sunken deep into their skulls, glowing faintly with an unnatural light that barely pierced the darkness. Their mouths were nothing but gaping maws, filled with jagged teeth that hadn't seen food in centuries, but still looked hungry. Skin, what little remained, was gray and mottled, stretched thin over their bones, like rotted parchment, crumbling with every movement. Their necks were twisted at unnatural angles, and their breathe came in ragged hisses, like the sound of wind through cracked glass.

A chill ran down Caldrek's spine as one of them turned its hollow gaze toward him. It was the eyes—those unblinking, black pools of death—that made his heart race.

The first of the undead lunged at Eryndil, its sword swinging wildly, too fast for something so decayed. Eryndil parried, but the force of the blow drove him back, his foot slipping on the slick stone. He cursed under his breath and stabbed forward, thrusting his elven blade deep into the creature's ribcage. The sword tore through rotting flesh with a sickening squelch. The

thing screeched, a guttural, inhuman wail, as it collapsed to the ground, twitching violently before going still.

Caldrek moved, his dagger flashing in the dim light. He sliced through the air with lethal precision, cutting one of the undead's arms clean off as it swung its axe toward him. The arm fell with a wet thud to the stone floor, the sword slipping from its hand. But the creature didn't stop. It crawled toward him, jaws snapping, and Caldrek's boot slammed into its skull, pushing it back. The creature's head crunched open, revealing a mass of blackened teeth and decayed flesh that poured out like maggots.

Beside him, Velka was a blur of movement—her poisoned shiv flashing as she stabbed into the throat of another undead, the blade slipping easily between its ribs. Blood-like ichor sprayed across her face as she twisted the blade, her smile twisted with a mix of fury and exhilaration.

But even as the undead fell in heaps around them, more kept coming. Caldrek was forced to dodge another strike, this time from a creature wielding a heavy axe, the blade whistling through the air as he barely ducked in time. Velka caught the creature's wrist, twisting it until it cracked and the weapon clattered to the ground. She shoved her blade deep into its side. It screeched, but she didn't flinch, her face hard with the rush of combat.

Eryndil, his elven agility unmatched, struck fast—his blade cutting through the air with graceful precision. He sliced through another creature's leg, severing it at the knee. The undead dropped like a stone, but still it tried to crawl toward him, clawing at the air with those horrible, dead fingers.

"We can't kill them all," Caldrek shouted, his voice tight with the effort of battle.

"We don't have to!" Velka yelled back, grinning through the blood-slicked blade in her hand. "Just kill enough of them!"

With a snarl, Caldrek grabbed a flask of oil from his pouch, his hands shaking as he fumbled with the stopper. He hurled it toward the remaining undead, and without hesitation, he lit it with a flint spark, sending a burst of flame roaring across the chamber. The undead howled, their bodies igniting instantly, but even in the fire, they didn't stop. They kept coming.

Caldrek slammed his fist into the wall, cursing. "There's too many!" He took a breath, then shouted at Eryndil. "We're getting out of here—NOW!"

As the flames spread, they ran—dragging each other through the chaos, barely avoiding the clutching hands of the undead, still burning and writhing in agony. The chamber, once an ancient place of silence and decay, was now a furnace of screams and burning bodies.

The further they ventured into the Undermaze, the more oppressive the air became. Each tunnel seemed to twist and turn, pulling them deeper into the bowels of the earth, and soon, even Eryndil's keen senses couldn't pinpoint where they were. The walls were made of ancient stone, slick with moisture and time. The tunnel paths seemed to stretch into infinity, the faintest whisper of movement around every corner making their nerves jitter.

Caldrek stopped in his tracks, staring ahead at the winding, endless passage. He let out a sigh, brushing a hand through his hair. "Damn it... we're lost."

Velka glanced around, her brow furrowed. "It's not the first time," she muttered, but even her voice held a hint of unease.

Eryndil stepped forward, his elven eyes glowing faintly in the dark, his features calm despite the maddening sense of disorientation that clung to them all. "We'll find the way," he said softly. "The Undermaze may be old, but it's not beyond me."

Caldrek squinted into the dark, feeling the weight of the silence. The sensation of being watched crawled up his spine. He wasn't a fool—something was down here, something ancient and hungry.

With a quiet grunt, Caldrek reached to the wall and grabbed a flickering torch that had been suspended in a rusty holder. He handed one to Velka, who looked at it briefly, then shrugged and lit it. The flame flared to life, sending a warm glow across the tunnel, but only for a brief moment. It seemed like the deeper they went, the less the light seemed to push back the darkness.

"Alright, let's keep moving." Caldrek's voice broke the silence. "The Bloodseal's not going to retrieve itself." They pressed forward, each step echoing unnervingly in the tunnel. The sound of dripping water grew louder, mixing with the distant rustling noises of unseen things.

As they moved deeper underground, a chilling stillness filled the air. Suddenly, there was a low groan, an unnatural rumble, as if the earth itself were groaning in agony. Then, the sound of bones scraping against stone.

Caldrek stopped, his senses on high alert. He turned toward Eryndil, his voice barely a whisper: "What is that?"

Eryndil's eyes glowed brighter, narrowing as he scanned the dark. "We're not alone." He drew his sword slowly, tension coiling in his muscles.

Then, it came. A shadow surged forward, as if the darkness itself had come to life. A mass of bones, moving in a disjointed, terrifying way, slithered toward them, a grotesque, malevolent serpent of shattered skulls and scattered limbs.

The creature was a Bonemaw—an ancient, intelligent monstrosity, its body formed from the bones of long-dead beasts, humanoids, and ferocious animals. Its head was a cracked, jagged skull of what appeared to be some kind of huge, vicious predator, its hollow eyes staring at them with malevolent intelligence.

It hissed as it slithered, its skull mouth opening wide, revealing rows of jagged, bone-like teeth, sharp as daggers. The creature's massive body coiled, and Velka cursed under her breath, slashing her dagger at the first bone she could reach. "We've got company!"

Caldrek barely had time to react. The Bonemaw lunged with surprising speed, its bones shifting like living armor. It opened its skull-mouth, aimed at Velka, and struck like a serpent.

Velka managed to dodge, but the creature's claws raked her leg, its sharp bone fingers tearing through her leathers and into her flesh. She gasped, pain flashing in her eyes, but she didn't hesitate. With a snarl, she stabbed her shiv deep into the Bonemaw's side, but the creature barely flinched, its hide of bone absorbing most of the blow.

"Keep it away from me!" Velka hissed through gritted teeth as she stumbled backward, clutching her bleeding leg.

Caldrek lunged forward, dagger raised, aiming for the Bonemaw's head, but it was too quick. The creature's massive body whipped around, smashing Caldrek into the stone wall with a sickening thud. The air was knocked out of him, and his vision swam as he slid down the wet stone, pain lancing through his back.

"Damn it!" He cursed, shaking his head to clear the dizziness, but the creature was already coming for him again, its skull mouth snapping like a trap.

Eryndil moved with the grace of a shadow, his elven blade striking true as he drove it into the Bonemaw's ribcage, but the creature screeched in fury, flailing its tail and striking Eryndil with a savage blow, sending him tumbling backward. Caldrek struggled to his feet, his breath ragged as he locked eyes with Velka. She was still on her feet, though blood soaked her leg. "We need fire! Now!"

Without hesitation, Caldrek grabbed a flask of oil, quickly uncorking it and tossing it toward the Bonemaw. The creature turned to face him, eyes burning with fury as it charged—but just as it lunged, Caldrek lit a match and threw it at the oil-soaked creature. The flames exploded across its bones, setting the rotting flesh ablaze as the Bonemaw howled in agony, its body twisting in pain. The blaze crawled up its bones, licking at its twisted form as it tried to wriggle free.

But it was too late. The Bonemaw let out one final screech before it collapsed, the flames consuming its remains, leaving only a smoldering heap of charred bone. Caldrek stood, breathing heavily, blood dripping from his own wounds. His hand shook as he pulled the dagger from the now lifeless corpse of the Bonemaw, wiping the blood off the blade.

Velka limped forward, her leg still bleeding but with her usual defiant glare. "That was too damn close." She grinned through the pain. "But it's dead."

Caldrek exhaled slowly, glancing over at Eryndil, who was already checking his wounds. "We're not done yet. Let's move."

They pushed forward into the depths of the tunnels, leaving the smoldering remains of the Bonemaw behind, but the eerie feeling that they were being watched lingered in the air like the ghost of a distant nightmare.

The tunnel stretched on, dark and oppressive, the air thick with the scent of wet stone and ancient decay. Caldrek could feel the oppressive weight of the place pressing in on him, the silence broken only by the occasional drip of water from the high, jagged ceiling. They moved cautiously, the light from their torches casting long, flickering shadows against the walls as they advanced deeper into the labyrinth.

Eryndil's elven senses seemed sharper in the oppressive darkness, his eyes flicking around constantly, scanning the shadows for movement. Velka walked a little ahead, her hand twitching toward the hilt of her blade every few steps, as if expecting an ambush.

Suddenly, a faint noise broke the silence—a high-pitched, almost musical sound, too faint to make out but undeniably familiar. Laughter—quick, sharp, and unmistakably mischievous.

Caldrek paused, raising a hand. “Did you hear that?”

Eryndil nodded, his face grim. “Gremlins.”

“Gremlins?” Velka's voice dropped to a near growl. “Great. Just what we needed.”

Caldrek glanced at her, lips curling into a grimace. “They can't be worse than those damn Hollowborn.”

“Oh, trust me, they're worse.” Velka muttered, her eyes narrowing as she looked down the tunnel. “They're like rats, but with wings. And a talent for causing absolute chaos.”

Eryndil moved forward, his elven instincts on full alert. “We'd best be careful. They're more about tricks and traps than actual combat.”

The tunnel widened suddenly, revealing a small cavern-like space, dimly lit by the flickering flames of their torches. And there they were—a group of Gremlins—a pack of mischievous little creatures perched on the stone ledges, their large, bat-like wings twitching as they watched the trio with glowing, beady eyes. Their mottled, gray-brown skin was slick with the moisture of the tunnels, and their oversized ears twitched constantly, listening to every movement with unnerving precision.

Velka caught sight of their sharp-toothed grins, and her hand automatically went to her dagger. “These little bastards aren't even worth the trouble. We'll just move on and—”

Before she could finish, one of the Gremlins darted from its perch, landing on the ground in front of them with a maniacal cackle. It skittered toward a pile of old, shattered crates, and suddenly—SNAP! A trip wire was triggered.

Caldrek barely had time to react before a large, fragile vase—likely an artifact from some ancient wreckage in the tunnels—came crashing down from above, smashing directly into Eryndil's head with a sickening thud. The elf staggered backward, his vision momentarily blurred as shards of porcelain scattered across the ground.

“Damn it!” Eryndil hissed, rubbing his head, blood trickling down his temple. His usually calm demeanor had shifted to a rare, fleeting moment of frustration.

As the Gremlins erupted into gleeful, shrill laughter, the sound echoed off the stone walls, growing louder. Another trip wire was triggered, and Velka's pants suddenly yanked her upward, as if an invisible hand had grabbed the waistband of her clothing.

“What the hell?” she shouted, hands flailing as she was hoisted off the ground by her pants, her feet kicking in mid-air. The Gremlins were in hysterics, watching as the trap worked—Velka hanging, helpless, in mid-air like a suspended doll.

One of the creatures flew past her, flapping its bat-like wings, and darted just out of reach. Another Gremlin darted under Caldrek’s feet, causing him to stumble.

“Get down here, you little shits!” Velka growled as she finally managed to cut the wire, dropping back to the ground with a sharp thud. She stumbled but quickly regained her balance, the Gremlins’ laughter still ringing in her ears.

Caldrek glanced up at the ceiling. “Is this it? Is this how we’re going to die? Hanging from wires and having vases thrown at our heads?”

Velka pulled her dagger from its sheath, eyes flashing with rage. “This is humiliating. I’ll make sure they regret it.”

The Gremlins continued their mischievous assault, swooping and diving in the air, triggering more traps and causing chaos. Caldrek, feeling the heat of anger rise, quickly grabbed a nearby loose rock, hurling it at one of the Gremlins, knocking it out of the air.

“Enough of this!” Caldrek shouted, and with a flick of his wrist, he launched a dagger at one of the Gremlins that had hovered too close. The blade sank deep into its side, and with a squeal, the creature fell to the ground, twitching as it crumpled.

“Finally!” Velka snapped, already dodging a trip wire that would’ve dropped a pile of rocks on her. She was visibly seething with frustration as she launched herself into action. “We’re not going to be made fools of by a bunch of winged rats.”

Eryndil, recovering from the vase hit, regained his composure and quickly drew his sword, slicing at the nearest Gremlin in the air. He cut through its wing with a swift, graceful strike. The creature dropped with a high-pitched wail, its wings unable to support it anymore.

Finally, Caldrek spotted the last two Gremlins, hiding behind a stack of ancient crates. “Let’s finish this, before they really get under our skin.”

Velka grinned, turning the knife in her hands. “Gladly.”

With a final, coordinated effort, they cornered the last of the Gremlins, swiftly disabling them with well-aimed strikes. The last one squealed in terror before being knocked unconscious by Velka’s dagger to its skull.

The chamber fell eerily quiet.

Caldrek looked around at the wreckage of the tunnels—the debris scattered, broken crates, the remnants of the traps. Velka grinned, but there was no humor in it now.

“Gremlins.” She muttered, wiping the sweat and grime from her brow. “They may not be deadly, but they sure are annoying.”

Caldrek chuckled, his hands still shaking slightly from the absurdity of the situation. "If they had any sense, they'd realize we'd make better allies than enemies." He glanced at Eryndil, who was already tending to the cut on his head. "But I'm glad they won't be around for the rest of this journey."

Velka grimaced as she glanced at her torn pants. "We need to keep moving. If I catch another trap like that, I'm going to skin something."

Hours had passed in the tunnels, their journey taking them deeper into the forgotten veins beneath Blackreach, the air growing thicker, the shadows darker, as they pushed forward toward what they hoped was the Bloodseal's resting place. Every corner they turned only seemed to lead them further into the heart of the maze, but with each step, the weight of the place pressed in on them more—unnatural, heavy, and suffocating.

Caldrek could feel it now—a low hum in the air, almost like the earth was alive, shifting beneath his feet, whispering dark secrets to those foolish enough to tread too deeply.

They came to an ancient stone doorway, its surface smooth and polished, as though it had never been touched by time. But when they approached, something in the air changed.

At first, it was subtle—a small breeze that turned frigid in an instant, then a drop in temperature that quickly escalated into a bone-chilling cold. Velka shivered, her breath misting in front of her face.

"What the hell—" Caldrek started, his voice a low growl as he pulled his coat tighter, but he was cut off by the sudden frost that began to form on his face, as if the very air had turned to ice.

Velka's lips trembled, her skin turning pale with the freezing cold. "This... this isn't natural." Her hand moved to her dagger, but her fingers were stiff, frozen in place.

Eryndil, too, felt the cold creep into his bones. His usually steady hands shook slightly as he fumbled for his blade. "We're not alone." His voice was tight with sudden realization, his breath misting in the freezing air.

Then it hit—a wave of fear, so sudden and visceral that it stopped them all in their tracks. Caldrek's heart began to pound as a deep, primal terror flooded his chest. The fear wasn't just the fear of death—it was something more ancient, more personal. It was the fear of being consumed, of being torn apart by something unknown.

He turned to look at Velka, but her face was already pale, her eyes wide, as she struggled to breathe through the mounting terror. The air around them grew darker, and three black shadows seemed to materialize out of thin air, emerging from the stone floor as if they had always been there—waiting, patient, and hungry.

They were like no creatures they had ever faced. They were not humanoid, nor were they simply shadows—they were a presence, darkness given shape, their forms shifting and twisting, like smoke made solid. Their edges were blurry, and their presence brought an overwhelming sense of wrongness. Their eyes—if they had eyes—were hollow black voids, as if they existed only to consume light and life.

Before Caldrek could even react, the first shadow lunged at him, and the sheer coldness of its touch felt like the essence of death itself. His dagger went straight through it, but it passed through as though he had tried to strike smoke. The creature didn't even slow.

The second shadow moved toward Velka, and before she could react, it swiped at her with its tendrils, the contact leaving tearing sounds like fabric being ripped apart—her flesh seemed to tear where it touched, leaving dark gashes that bled black blood. She screamed, but the shadow just laughed—a sound like the howling of a thousand forgotten souls.

The third shadow rushed toward Eryndil, who tried to bring his blade up to defend himself, but it was like the shadow was everywhere at once—its tendrils curling around his form, pulling at his body, almost like it was trying to consume him whole. He staggered, nearly falling, but he managed to stand, fighting through the overpowering fear.

The shadows swirled around them, moving too fast for them to strike back. Caldrek's blade was completely useless. Velka's dagger too. Nothing could touch them. The fear was so intense that it felt like the very air was suffocating them.

Suddenly, Caldrek felt something snap in his chest—a coldness, a darkness unlike anything he had ever known, like the creature's touch had reached inside him, pulling at something deep in his soul. The world around him darkened, and his vision blurred as terrifying images filled his mind—images of destruction, death, and a horrifying void where even his own screams were swallowed.

“Caldrek!” Velka's voice broke through the haze, but it felt distant—like she was calling from the other side of a great chasm. The fear was overpowering, suffocating, until his mind was filled with nothing but the screams of the dead.

In the midst of the terror, Eryndil's voice cut through, his words clear, though strained. He spoke words of power—arcane words, older than time itself—as he began to channel his magic.

"Arga'hal, fin-drahs!" Eryndil shouted, his voice like a crack of thunder in the oppressive silence.

The shadows recoiled at the sound, but they didn't leave. They lunged at him, but Eryndil raised his staff, his eyes glowing with white fire, as arcane power surged from his hands, sending waves of blinding light into the darkness. The shadows screamed—an unnatural, hollow sound—as they ripped apart, their forms disintegrating under the onslaught.

But it wasn't without a cost.

Eryndil fell to his knees, blood pouring from his nose and mouth, his hands trembling. His eyes, usually sharp and clear, were now clouded with the strain of casting such powerful magic. He had burned too much of his own energy.

“Eryndil!” Velka shouted, moving to him, but the elf held up a hand, his voice weak.

“I'm fine... I just... need a moment.” He gasped, his breath ragged as he fought to stay conscious.

Caldrek staggered to his feet, his hands shaking. The shadows were gone, but their lingering presence felt like a weight on his chest—an echo of the horror that had just swept through them.

Velka wiped the blood from her leg, still shaking from the fear that had nearly paralyzed her. "We're not going to survive down here if this keeps up."

Caldrek nodded, the taste of darkness still lingering in his throat. "We need to keep moving. We're not done yet."

Eryndil, still gasping for air, slowly rose to his feet, his staff trembling in his hand. "We are getting closer... but the worst may yet be ahead."

With heavy hearts and shaking hands, the party continued onward, but the fear remained. Something darker, far older, was waiting in the depths of the Undermaze, and they hadn't seen the last of it.

They approached the door, its heavy iron hinges groaning in protest as they pushed it open. Inside, the room stretched out before them—a vast, shadowed chamber, its air thick with the weight of forgotten years. The floor was covered in a thick layer of dust, disturbed only by the faintest traces of their footsteps.

At the very center of the room, resting atop a blackened pedestal of cracked dwarven stone, pulsed the Bloodseal.

It wasn't large—no bigger than a man's palm—but it throbbed with a sickly red glow, like the slow, rhythmic beat of a dying heart. The ancient dwarven runes carved into its surface had long since darkened, but every few seconds, they flickered—bright, raw, pulsing with something unnatural.

Caldrek exhaled sharply, stepping forward. "Well, that looks friendly."

Velka, still pale from nearly getting skewered, narrowed her eyes at the thing. "That's what we almost died for?"

Eryndil had gone still.

His usual sharp gaze wasn't just wary—it was fearful.

"This isn't just a relic," he murmured. "This is a key—to something best left buried."

Caldrek frowned. "Key to what?"

Eryndil's fingers twitched at his side. "Something the dead were meant to hold onto."

Caldrek rolled his shoulders, stepping closer. "Well, they're not holding it very well, are they?"

The elf hissed in frustration, but Caldrek was already reaching forward, gloved fingers brushing the surface of the Bloodseal.

The moment his skin made contact, the entire tomb shuddered.

A deep, groaning tremor rippled through the stone walls, dust cascading from the ceiling like falling ash. The ancient carvings along the chamber walls flickered, their runes glowing dimly, as if something inside them had been stirred awake.

Velka cursed. "Oh, that's never good."

Eryndil backed up instantly, his hand moving toward the dagger at his hip.

Caldrek clenched his jaw, trying to ignore the way the Bloodseal felt warm beneath his fingers. Not just warm—alive.

Then, the sound came. Stone grinding against stone. Something massive was moving. And they weren't alone anymore. The grinding of stone grew louder, a deep, shuddering groan that rattled through the chamber. Then something moved in the darkness.

Caldrek yanked his hand away from the Bloodseal, heart hammering. The pedestal beneath it sank slightly, as if triggering some ancient mechanism.

The floor split open. From the black pit beneath, a figure rose.

At first, it was just a silhouette, too large, too inhumanly broad to be a normal dwarf. Then the details emerged—jagged iron plating fused into brittle, yellowed bones, the remains of a long-dead protector bound into something unholy. Rusted dwarven runes were etched into its armor, and its skull—twisted, fused to a steel helm—lacked a jaw, leaving an empty, gaping abyss where a mouth should be.

Its arms split and reformed as it shifted, long jagged blades emerging from the fused marrow of its limbs. Eryndil's breath hitched. "A dwarven guardian," he murmured. "But this... this is wrong."

The thing snapped its head toward them. The glowing red embers where its eyes should be flared—a burning, wordless rage. Then it moved. Faster than it should have. Velka barely had time to react before the Guardian lunged, its bladed arms swinging in a deadly arc.

Caldrek barely saw her move before the thing's blade smashed into her ribs.

Velka was hurled across the chamber, hitting the wall with a sickening crack. She crumpled to the ground, gasping in pain, one hand clutching her side.

Caldrek had no time to check if she was breathing.

Because the Guardian was already turning toward him.

It lunged again, and Caldrek threw himself into a roll, hitting the dusty stone just as a massive blade cleaved downward, splitting the floor where he had just been standing.

Shards of stone and dust exploded outward, peppering Caldrek's face as he landed in a crouch.

The thing was strong. It was fast. And it wasn't going to stop. Caldrek gritted his teeth, rolling to his feet as the Guardian twisted toward him, its bladed limbs scraping against stone, dragging deep, unnatural gouges into the floor.

Velka was still gasping for breath against the far wall, one arm clutched over her ribs. Eryndil had a blade drawn, but even he looked like he knew the truth—this wasn't a fight they could win.

The thing was too strong. Too fast. Caldrek's mind raced. He wasn't a warrior—he was a thief, a toolsmith, an engineer of destruction.

And if you couldn't kill something, you buried it.

His eyes snapped to the massive stone pillars supporting the chamber—ancient, cracked with age, barely holding under the weight of centuries. That would do. His fingers were already moving, reaching into his satchel as the Guardian lunged again.

Caldrek dodged—barely, feeling the rush of wind as the bladed arm sliced through the air, carving through the stone floor like it was paper. His hands worked fast, pulling out a coil of fine steel wire, a set of wedges, and a small flask of black powder.

Velka, still groaning from the hit, lifted her head and saw what he was doing. "Oh, you bastard," she muttered. "Shut up and get ready to run!"

Caldrek jammed the wedges into the cracks in the stone, winding the steel wire through the weak points. He set three pressure triggers, the final one leading back to the pedestal.

The Guardian turned. Its red eyes flared, sensing what he was doing. It charged. Caldrek lunged forward, slamming his hand against the final trigger. The explosion ripped through the chamber. The pillars splintered. The ceiling shook. A deafening groan of breaking stone echoed through the tomb as massive chunks of rock began to collapse.

Caldrek snatched the Bloodseal from its pedestal just as the Guardian reached him. The thing lunged, blades flashing— And then the ceiling came down. A massive stone slab crashed into the Guardian's side, sending it sprawling, its bladed limbs still thrashing violently as more rubble buried it beneath an avalanche of ancient stone.

The last thing Caldrek saw was those red, burning eyes—fading beneath the weight of the tomb. Then he ran. Velka was already scrambling for the exit, one arm clutching her ribs, cursing violently with every step. Eryndil followed, his expression somewhere between relief and disbelief. They barely made it out before the entire chamber collapsed behind them, sealing the Guardian—and whatever cursed magic bound it—inside forever.

Silence. Only the dust settled.

Caldrek stood there, panting, filthy, victorious. The Bloodseal sat heavy in his palm, its eerie red glow now dim but still pulsing—still alive.

Then, the air shifted. Not from the collapse. Something old and unseen stirred. Velka, still catching her breath, noticed it too. "That's not good," she muttered.

Eryndil, pale and silent, only whispered one thing. "We weren't the only ones who woke up tonight."

By the time they reached Blackreach, Caldrek felt like his skin was too tight.

The Bloodseal pulsed in his satchel, its unnatural glow hidden beneath thick layers of cloth, but he could still feel it thudding against his ribs. Like a heartbeat. Velka led them through the side alleys of Cinder Hollow, sticking to the shadows, moving quickly. None of them spoke.

Caldrek's mind was elsewhere. Something had left the tomb with them. He knew it.

Eryndil noticed it too. The elf had been uneasy the entire way back, glancing at shadows, fingers twitching toward his dagger. Then, at a crossroads near Brass Quarter, Eryndil stopped. "This is where we part ways," he said, voice firm.

Velka narrowed her eyes. "What, too good for a safehouse?"

Eryndil met Caldrek's gaze. "You can feel it, can't you?"

Caldrek exhaled. He didn't need to ask what 'it' was. He just nodded.

Eryndil nodded back. "I need to find out what we woke up." He pulled up his hood, stepping into the next alley. "Stay alive, thief."

Then he was gone.

The Queens Hunters

Caldrek stood in the alley across from The Sooted Weasel, hood drawn low, jaw clenched as he took in the scene before him.

Three bodies hung from the iron spikes driven into the tavern's outer wall—stripped to the waist, their throats sliced open ear to ear, arms dangling limp at their sides. Their lifeless eyes stared down at the streets, their skin pale beneath the growing storm.

Caldrek recognized all of them. Keff, the coin-runner who handled payoffs in the Warrens. Bran, a fence who dealt in stolen noble goods. And Marta—his old lookout. She'd barely been twenty. Velka stood beside him, arms crossed, her expression unreadable. But her hands were balled into fists. Caldrek's stomach tightened.

Mordrak had sent a message.

Not to the city. Not to the underworld. To him. A deep, steady anger boiled beneath his skin, pressing against his ribs.

Velka exhaled through her nose, breaking the silence. "You get it now?"

Caldrek didn't answer.

She turned toward him, eyes sharp. "This isn't just another bounty. This isn't some city guard nonsense or some pissed-off merchant. This is the Queen." She nodded toward the bodies. "And she wants your head. Now."

Caldrek finally looked at her, his face unreadable. "You think I don't know that?"

Velka didn't back down. "I think you're still acting like you've got a way out of this. Like you can somehow outplay Mordrak, outmaneuver the Pale Hands, and still crawl out of this alive. But this?" She gestured at the bodies again. "This says otherwise."

Caldrek's fingers twitched at his side, resisting the urge to reach for a blade. Not because he was angry at her—but because she was right. This wasn't just a hunt anymore. This was an execution waiting to happen. Velka lowered her voice, stepping closer. "You need to disappear. Now."

Caldrek exhaled, his breath steady despite the storm inside him. "Not yet."

Velka's jaw tightened. "Cald—"

"I said not yet."

He turned away, pulling his hood lower, eyes locked on the rain-slicked streets ahead.

Mordrak wanted to send a message? Fine. Caldrek would send one back.

Caldrek pulled his hood low and kept his head down as he slipped through the winding alleys of Cinder Hollow, the worst part of Blackreach's lower districts. The streets here were thick with smoke, filth, and the stink of rotting food, the buildings leaning on each other like drunks too tired to stand upright. He needed to get out.

The Queen's bounty hunters were moving fast, and if Mordrak had already started hanging bodies in the streets, then the next one would be his. There was only one way out of the city that wasn't crawling with guards—The Rusted Docks.

That was where smugglers worked their trade, where coin bought silence, and where a man could vanish if he paid the right price.

Caldrek made his way through the sludge-covered streets, cutting through side alleys until he reached The Sunken Rat, a half-rotted warehouse where smugglers and black-market traders ran their business. Inside, the air was thick with salt and damp wood, crates stacked high, smugglers counting coin over crates of illicit cargo.

A man named Ruzzo the Toad ran things here.

He was a short, round bastard, his hair slicked back, his greasy leathers stained with oil. He grinned when he saw Caldrek approach, but it wasn't a friendly grin.

"Blackthane. Haven't seen you in a while." His gold tooth gleamed in the lantern light. "Something tells me you ain't here for a social call."

Caldrek kept his voice calm. "I need passage out of the city. Quiet. No questions asked."

Ruzzo's grin widened. "Lucky for you, I run a fine business of discreet travel. Unlucky for you..."

He reached behind the counter and slammed a parchment onto the table. Caldrek didn't need to look. He already knew what it was. His bounty.

WANTED: CALDREK BLACKTHANE
THIEF. TRAITOR. DEAD OR ALIVE.
REWARD: 10,000 GOLD.

Caldrek's gut twisted. The price had doubled.

Ruzzo leaned forward, tapping the parchment. "That's a lot of coin, Blackthane. A lot of coin." His voice turned sickly sweet. "So tell me, why shouldn't I hand you over to Mordrak and retire early?"

Caldrek's fingers itched toward his dagger, but he kept his expression blank.

"Because you're a businessman, Ruzzo," he said slowly. "And a smart businessman knows that if you hand me over to Mordrak, you get one payday. But if you put me on a ship, you get two."

Ruzzo arched an eyebrow. "Two, eh?"

Caldrek nodded. "You take my gold now, you get paid. Then when things settle, I owe you a favor—a big one. And you know damn well a favor from me is worth more than any bounty."

Ruzzo rubbed his chin, considering. For a moment, Caldrek thought it was working.

Then—the front doors burst open. A group of armed men flooded inside, iron-clad boots clanking against the wooden floor. Their leader, a tall bastard with a scarred cheek and Mordrak's insignia on his pauldron, locked eyes with Caldrek and grinned. "There you are."

Caldrek's stomach dropped. The whole thing had been a setup. Ruzzo sighed, shaking his head. "Sorry, Blackthane. Business is business."

Caldrek didn't hesitate. He grabbed the closest crate, hurled it into the smuggler's face, and ran. Caldrek hit the alley running, boots slamming against wet cobblestones as shouts erupted behind him. Ruzzo's men weren't the real threat. They were just bounty hounds, greedy and predictable. The real problem was Mordrak's enforcers.

And if they had found him at the docks, that meant the whole damn city was closing in. He needed to disappear. Fast.

The nearest safe route was the Sewers of Old Braxford—a rotting, half-forgotten tunnel system beneath the old quarter of Blackreach. It was a cursed place. A graveyard of history. Perfect for a man with nowhere else to run. Caldrek ducked into a side street, vaulted over a rusted fence, and sprinted toward a half-sunken storm drain, its entrance hidden beneath overgrown ivy. Behind him, Mordrak's enforcers thundered through the streets.

"Find him! Seal the docks!"

Caldrek didn't wait to hear more. He grabbed the edge of the drain grate, yanked it open, and dropped into the dark. The air was thick with mildew and rot, the tunnels lined with crumbling stonework and old rusted pipes. Caldrek moved fast, his boots splashing through filthy water, torchlight from the street above fading behind him. The tunnels twisted, narrowing in some places, widening in others, leading into the underbelly of a city that had long since forgotten them.

His breath was steady. His heart pounded. But he wasn't alone. He felt it before he heard it. That prickling sensation at the back of his skull. The air shifted. Caldrek stopped. Listened. Nothing. Not rats. Not dripping water. Not even the echo of his own breath. Silence. Too much of it. He barely had time to react before the first blade came for his throat. He twisted just in time, the dagger slashing across his shoulder instead of his neck.

Then they were everywhere. The Pale Hands. The Queen's personal assassins. Silent, masked, moving like shadows. Caldrek lashed out, catching one across the ribs with his dagger, but they didn't cry out—they never made a sound. Another came from behind—a thin, deadly wraith clad in blackened leather, curved daggers glinting in the dim sewer light.

Caldrek barely dodged the strike, but the third assassin was faster. A blade punched into his side. White-hot pain exploded through his ribs, and for a moment, his vision blurred. They were playing with him. Wounding, not killing. Dragging it out. The Queen's way.

Caldrek gritted his teeth, forcing himself to move, twisting the knife free before the assassin could drive it deeper. Blood ran down his side. His breath was sharp and ragged. But he wasn't dead yet. And if they thought they could kill him easy? They were damn wrong. The Pale Hands didn't hesitate. They never did. Caldrek barely had time to rip the bloodied dagger from his side before the next assassin lunged.

His instincts screamed—he twisted, but not fast enough. Cold steel punched through his palm. A sharp, sickening crunch filled the tunnel as the blade drove through flesh and bone, nailing his hand to the slimy stone wall behind him. White-hot pain shot through his arm, his vision blurring for a half-second. The assassin—a silent, faceless wraith clad in blackened leather—held the hilt firm, twisting the blade ever so slightly, watching him bleed.

Caldrek snarled, his free hand snapping up, dagger flashing. The assassin dodged effortlessly, slipping away like mist. The other one attacked next. Caldrek saw the glint of the blade coming for his ribs, but he was done playing.

He used his own impaled hand as leverage—pushing off the wall, ripping the blade clean through his flesh—a burst of agony flooding his arm as he charged straight into the next assassin. They tumbled backward into the knee-deep sewage, splashing into the churning filth of the tunnel's stagnant waters.

The assassin struggled, faster, stronger, trained for this. Caldrek didn't fight like a soldier. He fought like a cornered animal. With a snarl, he slammed his forearm against the assassin's throat, pushing him down, deeper into the foul, reeking sludge. The assassin thrashed. Kicked. Clawed at his face. Caldrek held him down. The bubbles started. Then slowed. Then stopped. Caldrek didn't wait for the others. He ripped his knife from his belt with his good hand, spun, and hurled it down the tunnel—blind, instinctive.

A wet crunch. A grunt of pain. He didn't stay to see if it was a kill-shot. He ran. One hand gushing blood, the taste of sewage thick in his mouth, his ribs screaming in protest. Behind him, the remaining Pale Hands didn't chase immediately. They didn't have to. Because the Queen's assassins never rushed. They just waited. Watched. And then they came for you when you least expected it.

The Monstrosity Beneath the City

Caldrek staggered through the darkness, his breath ragged, his bloodied hand still slick with filth from the sewers. Every movement sent a sharp, pulsing ache through his ribs, his shoulder, and the fresh hole in his palm. He wasn't sure how long he had been running.

Long enough that the sounds of the Pale Hands had faded behind him. Long enough that the air had changed. The sewers of Blackreach were filthy, but alive—filled with the stench of rot, piss, and old sewage. But here? Here, in the deepest, forgotten tunnels beneath the city—in the Undermaze—the air was thick with something worse.

Something old. Something hungry. The walls were slick with condensation, the bricks warped and stretched in ways they shouldn't be. Faded carvings, older than the city itself, ran along the stone, covered in thick layers of grime and claw marks. Caldrek exhaled through his nose, forcing himself to focus.

He had been on this spot before. Years ago. But something had changed. The air wasn't just damp—it was thick with the stench of blood. Not fresh blood, not the metallic tang of a new wound. This was old, rotting, seeping from the walls themselves.

A few feet ahead, the tunnel opened into a cavernous chamber, its ceiling lost in the dark, the floor covered in piles of discarded bones. Some human. Some... not. Caldrek's grip tightened around his dagger. Something was here. Something waiting. And whatever it was—It had noticed him. Caldrek stood still, barely breathing. The air in the Undermaze had thickened, heavy with the stench of decay and something worse—something unnatural.

Then he heard it. A wet, slithering noise. Not the skitter of rats or the drip of stagnant water. This was something bigger. Something breathing. The sound came from the far end of the chamber, beyond the piles of discarded bones and torn scraps of clothing. Caldrek's fingers tightened around his dagger. His instincts screamed at him to run.

Then, the corpse-pile moved. Not like a shifting mass collapsing under its own weight.

Like something underneath was pushing up. A sick, wet squelch echoed as a massive form began to rise from beneath the bones, its bloated, stitched-together flesh sloughing away in places, revealing patchworks of rotting muscle and old, greying skin.

Caldrek took a step back, barely stopping himself from cursing aloud. The thing that rose should not exist. It was a mass of bodies, twisted and stitched together in a horrible mockery of life. Limbs fused unnaturally, jagged pieces of bone poking through where flesh hadn't quite settled. Caldrek's stomach twisted.

He could still see faces in the thing's torso—twisted, frozen expressions of agony, their mouths sewn shut with Malachi's cursed black thread. Malachi had created this.

His twisted experiments, his obsession with the dead, had led to this thing—a grotesque, bloated horror of old thieves, murderers, and forgotten souls.

The Flesh-Titan shifted, its stitched lips parting in a choked, gurgling moan. It sensed him. Then—it moved. Faster than it should have. Caldrek barely had time to react before the thing lunged. The Flesh-Titan surged forward, its massive bulk rolling like a living avalanche, the air filling with the reek of rotting flesh and old blood.

Caldrek barely dodged to the side, throwing himself behind a fallen slab of stone just as a fused mass of bone and muscle smashed into the ground where he had stood. The impact shook the tunnel walls, sending loose stones crumbling from above.

His dagger was worthless. His usual tricks—pressure points, precise cuts—meant nothing against a thing with no nerves, no organs, just endless, pulsing slabs of dead flesh. Caldrek rolled, scrambling for distance, scanning the chamber. Think, damn it. Think. He needed leverage. An edge.

His gaze flicked to the tunnel walls—old dwarven stonework, cracked with age, weakened by time. The ceiling had already groaned when the Titan crashed into the ground. That was it.

If he couldn't kill this thing, he'd bury it, an old trick of his. Caldrek sprinted toward the closest support pillar, his free hand already digging into his satchel, pulling out a length of wire and two collapsible wedges—small but strong, meant for setting up quick-structure failures in a pinch.

Velka always mocked him for carrying so much useless gear. But right now? It was the only thing keeping him alive.

The Titan roared, a grotesque, gurgling sound as its many arms flexed and twitched, dragging itself forward. The sound of wet muscle scraping against stone made Caldrek's skin crawl.

He worked fast, wedging the supports into the cracks, his fingers moving on instinct. One. Two. Three. A quick pull of the wire, and the supports would buckle, bringing the entire damn section down.

The Titan lunged. Caldrek barely had time to throw himself sideways as a massive, bloated arm slammed into the wall beside him, cracking the stone. He grabbed the wire, grit his teeth—And yanked.

A deep, thunderous groan rippled through the tunnel. Then—the stone gave way. The ceiling above them collapsed, raining tons of rock and shattered dwarven masonry down upon the Titan.

The thing bellowed, a sound like a dozen voices screaming at once, before it vanished beneath the crushing weight of the Undermaze. The dust hit Caldrek's lungs like fire, but he forced himself to move, staggering away from the crumbling mess, hand pressed to his ribs.

He took one last look at the mound of stone and pulped flesh. The Titan wasn't dead. Not really. But it was buried. And that was good enough for now.

Caldrek coughed against the thick cloud of dust, his lungs burning from the collapse. His body screamed in protest—ribs bruised, muscles torn, blood still seeping from his hand—but he forced himself to move. The cavern was barely standing. Cracks snaked up the walls, chunks of loose stone shifting above, the very earth groaning as if the Undermaze itself was furious. But it wasn't just the tunnels that were still alive. The Flesh-Titan moved. Caldrek froze.

Beneath the mountain of rubble, bloated arms still twitched, fingers curling against stone, fused bones snapping and resetting. The thing wasn't dead. It was pinned, crushed under the weight of its own unnatural mass, its body twitching as if it couldn't comprehend being restrained.

Then— It whispered his name. Not in one voice. In many. A chorus of overlapping, rasping voices, some deep, some shrill, some speaking in broken, wet gasps. *"Caldrek... Blackthane..."* His blood turned to ice. He stepped back. Slow. Careful. The thing shuddered beneath the rubble, and the whispers grew louder. *"Thief... stealer... flesh-taker..."*

He could hear the individual voices now. Some were too familiar. A woman's voice, half-crushed beneath the weight of a fading memory: *"Cald... why'd you leave me behind..."*

Marta. One of the hanged bodies outside The Sooted Weasel. Caldrek's breath hitched. Then another. A man's voice, ragged, broken, full of hate. *"You took my gold, Caldrek. I'm coming to take it back."*

Bran. The fence. More voices joined. More of the dead.

"We are waiting, Caldrek..."

"We see you..."

"We know you..."

The thing beneath the rubble shifted, its many faces turning toward him, though its stitched mouths remained shut. Caldrek's hands were slick with sweat. His instincts screamed.

He turned and ran. Didn't look back. Didn't stop. Even as the whispers echoed behind him, clawing at his mind. Even as the air in the tunnels felt colder, like something unseen was still reaching for him. He ran until his legs nearly gave out. And still— The voices didn't stop.

A Night of Sin and Secrets

Caldrek needed to disappear. Fast. The Undermaze had nearly swallowed him whole, and now the voices of the dead whispered his name through the stone. The Pale Hands were still hunting him, and Mordrak had bounty hounds sniffing the streets. He wasn't just a marked man anymore—he was prey.

So he did what any smart thief did when the noose tightened. He went somewhere nobody would expect him to be.

The Gilded Veil stood on the wealthy side of Blackreach, nestled between opulent manors and golden-lit streets, a sanctuary of silk, perfume, and pleasure. The Queen's spies, mercenary nobles, and criminals in fine clothes all came here, hiding in plain sight among courtesans, wine, and whispered deals.

It was not the kind of place Caldrek usually set foot in. He didn't like soft beds, lace-covered rooms, or the cloying scent of too much incense. He didn't like perfumed nobles who had never worked a day in their lives.

But he did like the person he had come to find. A woman who collected secrets like daggers and knew how to use both.

Lysara Volentis. The Gilded Veil's most coveted courtesan. And the Queen's most dangerous spy.

Caldrek pulled his hood lower and stepped through the arched entryway, past silk curtains and flickering golden lanterns. The air was warm, thick with the scent of myrrh, spice, and slow-burning desires.

Soft music drifted through the halls, mingling with the sound of low, sultry laughter and wine being poured into crystal goblets. He barely made it three steps before a tall, gilded manservant placed a firm hand on his chest. "No weapons beyond this point, sir," the man said smoothly, his voice as polished as his embroidered vest.

Caldrek gave a thin smile. "I'm not here for trouble."

The manservant's gaze flicked to the dried blood on his sleeve. "Of course not," he murmured. Caldrek sighed, pulling two daggers from his belt, one from his boot, and another from his sleeve. The man arched a brow but said nothing as he took them, placing them in a velvet-lined box.

Then he stepped aside, gesturing for Caldrek to enter. "The lady is expecting you."

Of course she was. Caldrek exhaled and stepped inside. Into the web of Lysara Volentis. Caldrek moved through the gold-lit halls of The Gilded Veil, past billowing curtains, soft laughter, and the scent of clove-spiced wine.

This place made his skin itch. It was too clean, too perfect—a silk-draped illusion meant to make men forget the knives waiting behind the smiles. He never forgot. Especially not here.

At the far end of the hall, a set of double doors stood open, leading into a private lounge. The air inside was thicker than the rest of the Veil—warmer, heavier, charged. And at the center of it, reclining on a plush velvet divan, dressed in nothing but flowing red silk and wicked amusement, was Lysara Volentis. Caldrek exhaled through his nose. Dangerous women. It was always dangerous women.

Lysara's black hair cascaded over her bare shoulders, her golden eyes flickering in the candlelight like a cat that had just spotted its next meal. She didn't rise when he entered. She didn't need to. She simply smiled.

"Well, well. If it isn't Blackreach's favorite rat." Her voice was smooth as honey, but beneath it was a razor's edge. Caldrek tilted his head slightly, his expression unreadable. "I was in the neighborhood."

"Liar," she purred, lifting a goblet of dark wine to her lips, taking a slow, deliberate sip. "You don't come here unless you're desperate."

Caldrek gave a humorless smile. "Maybe I just missed you."

Lysara chuckled, setting her goblet down with a soft clink. "Flattery doesn't suit you. But I must admit—you do look positively wretched."

She gestured toward him with a lazy flick of her fingers. "Bloodstained clothes, half-healed wounds, an air of paranoia thick enough to choke on... You're either running from someone, or you just crawled out of a grave."

Caldrek stepped forward, lowering himself into a chair across from her, wincing slightly as his ribs protested. "Bit of both, actually." Lysara studied him, her gaze trailing over him like she was taking stock of every weakness, every unspoken word. Then, after a brief pause, she leaned forward, her lips curling into a knowing smile. "Tell me everything."

Caldrek exhaled. Of course she'd say that. Lysara leaned forward, the soft glow of candlelight tracing the curves of her silk-draped figure. Her golden eyes flickered with something dangerous, knowing—hungry. "You look exhausted," she murmured, fingers idly tracing the stem of her goblet. "Tired men make mistakes. Careless men die."

Caldrek smiled, stretching out in his chair as if he wasn't already calculating the best way out of this room if things went sideways. "Good thing I'm neither."

Lysara chuckled, rising in a slow, languid motion, her silk robes sliding effortlessly along her skin. She stepped toward him, her scent rich with jasmine and something darker beneath it. She circled him, the way a panther might circle a wounded deer—not rushing, just enjoying the moment.

"You didn't come here just to drink my wine, did you?" she whispered, her fingers brushing the back of his neck, featherlight. "You're hiding something, Caldrek. I can taste it in the air."

Caldrek didn't flinch. Didn't move. He just let her play her game. "I thought we both liked a little mystery, Lys."

She laughed softly, pressing closer. "Oh, I do. But I also like answers. And you—" she slid into his lap, her thighs straddling his, warm silk pooling around her legs—"are the most interesting question I've seen in weeks."

Caldrek's hands rested at his sides, his heartbeat steady, his breath slow. He could feel the heat of her, the slow drag of her nails along his collarbone, the deliberate way her lips hovered just above his throat.

It would be so easy, he realized. If she wanted to slit his throat, she'd barely need a second. And if he wanted to break her neck, he'd need just a little longer. But neither of them moved. It was a game, and they both knew it. She exhaled, her breath warm against his ear. "Tell me, love... what exactly are you running from?"

Caldrek let the silence hang, his mind moving faster than his pulse. She was more than a courtesan. Always had been. She was a Queen's whisperer, a spy who wrapped secrets in silk and let men kill themselves over her favors. And if she was asking questions, it meant the Queen was already listening.

Caldrek finally smiled, tilting his head slightly to brush his lips dangerously close to hers, but never quite closing the distance. "You tell me, Lys. Who sent you fishing for my secrets?"

She laughed, slow and wicked. "Oh, darling. You wound me." Her fingers slid down his chest, teasing, exploring—and pausing just over his satchel. Caldrek caught her wrist before she could slip inside. The smile faded from her lips, replaced by something colder, sharper.

"Careful, Lys." His grip was firm, but not unkind. "You don't want what's in there." Her gaze flicked up to his, and for a heartbeat, neither of them spoke.

Then, slowly, she smiled. "Don't I?"

Lysara moved like silk over fire, her body pressing into Caldrek's as she led him deeper into her chambers. The air was thick with the scent of incense, wine, and something sweetly poisonous—like a trap waiting to be sprung.

Caldrek let himself be guided, let her fingers trace the lines of his scars, let her lips linger against his throat, let her press him down into the sheets that smelled like spice and sin. It wasn't the first time they'd played this game. But it might be the most dangerous.

Her silk robe slid from her shoulders, pooling onto the floor like a dropped veil of crimson. The flickering lantern light cast shadows across her golden skin, her eyes watching him with that same predatory amusement.

"You should sleep more, love," she murmured against his skin, her lips dragging along his collarbone, down his chest. "You look like a man who's forgotten what it's like to feel something good."

Caldrek exhaled sharply, his fingers already digging into her hips, pulling her closer, drinking in the warmth of her. "Maybe I just needed the right reason," he muttered, letting his mouth find hers, sharp and hungry.

Lysara laughed into the kiss, a wicked, breathy sound, one that melted into a moan as he flipped her beneath him, his hands trailing down her bare thighs, his mouth moving with slow, calculated precision.

He took his time. Took his revenge for every moment she'd played him before. She arched against him, nails digging into his back, her breath hitching when his teeth grazed along the inside of her thigh. But beneath all the heat, beneath the way she gasped his name against his skin, beneath the way her fingers clutched at his shoulders like she didn't want to let go—

Caldrek was still watching. Still listening. Because this wasn't just sex. It was a game. And he wasn't about to lose.

His fingers slid over the sheets, slow, searching—and then he felt it. Just beneath her pillow. A blade. Small. Thin. Sharp. Not a paranoid girl's dagger—no, this was an assassin's weapon. A killer's knife. For one brief moment, his body tensed. Because he knew, just as she did, that if she had wanted—if she had planned it right— That blade would already be in his throat. But she hadn't moved for it. Not yet. So Caldrek didn't stop.

He let the heat pull them both under, let her moans muffle the warning bells in his skull. But one thing was certain. By the time the night was over— One of them would have the upper hand.

Caldrek lay in the warm, dimly lit chamber, his body still thrumming with the aftershocks of pleasure, the scent of Lysara's perfume lingering on the sheets. The soft glow of candlelight flickered across the velvet-draped walls, casting golden hues over the silk-laden bed. He kept his breathing slow, steady—just enough to make it seem like sleep had taken him. But he wasn't asleep. He never was.

Across the room, Lysara moved with the slow grace of a woman who had done this a hundred times before. Her bare form shimmered under the lantern glow as she slipped soundlessly from the bed, her every step measured, calculated. She didn't rush, didn't hesitate. There was no uncertainty in her movements—because she was exactly where she wanted to be. She wasn't looking for coin. She wasn't lingering for sentiment. She was looking for what Caldrek had stolen.

He watched her from beneath heavy lids, barely letting his eyes crack open as she made her way to the bedside table where his satchel lay. His fingers had deliberately left it unbuckled, an easy invitation for the kind of woman who never took what was freely given—only what was meant to be stolen.

Lysara paused for the briefest moment, tilting her head just slightly as if sensing a trap, but it wasn't enough to dissuade her. With a flick of her delicate fingers, she reached inside, fishing through the carefully folded layers of cloth. Her touch was light, precise. And then she found it—the parchment. The map.

She barely made a sound as she slid it free, rolling it between her fingertips. It was an impressive bit of sleight of hand, really. For any other mark, it would have worked flawlessly. But Caldrek had played this game before. His hand shot out and closed around her wrist, stopping her mid-motion. Lysara froze, though only for a fraction of a second. Then, slow and fluid, she turned her gaze toward him, golden eyes flashing with something between amusement and approval.

"Awake already?" she purred, the smile on her lips sharp as a knife's edge. Caldrek smiled, his grip firm but unthreatening. "A woman like you in my bed? I'd be a fool to sleep through it." She arched a brow, letting out a quiet chuckle. "And yet, you let me try anyway."

Caldrek sat up, still holding her wrist, though his other hand was already trailing over the parchment she had taken. He wasn't angry. In fact, he was enjoying himself more than he probably should have. She had played her part flawlessly—just as he had known she would. And now, she thought she had won. She thought she was getting away with something.

Lysara studied him, her lips slightly parted, reading his expression like a card player assessing a bluff. She was sharp, but she was used to winning. Caldrek had seen this moment before, seen it play out a dozen times in backroom gambling halls and across candlelit deals. She was waiting for his next move, waiting to see if he would strike out or let her go.

He leaned in close, just enough for his breath to ghost against the shell of her ear. "Run along, Lys," he murmured, voice smooth as steel. "Go bring that back to your Queen."

For the first time that night, something flickered in her eyes. Realization. Caldrek let go of her wrist, watching as she slid the parchment into the folds of her silk robe, her expression carefully composed. For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then, ever so slightly, she shook her head and let out a quiet, almost exasperated laugh.

"You dangerous little bastard," she whispered. Then she turned, stepping away with the same graceful confidence she always carried, vanishing through the silk-draped doorway without another word.

Caldrek sat back against the headboard, exhaling slowly as he ran a hand through his hair. He had played her. She thought she had won—but she was now leading him straight into the Queen's plans. And when the time came, he'd be ready.

The Cursed Tomb

The ruins of Aldhelm loomed ahead, a broken corpse of stone and silence. Once, these streets had belonged to Blackreach's noble elite—before the fires, before the plague, before whatever cursed force had left this place to rot. Now, the ruins stood empty, save for the whisper of wind through shattered archways and the distant rustling of vermin that had long since claimed the dead city as their own.

Caldrek moved through the rubble-strewn streets, following Lysara's trail. She had taken the forged map, thinking she had stolen something valuable. In truth, he had let her take it—baiting her to lead him straight to the Queen's real objective.

It wasn't the Bloodseal. That was already secured in his satchel, its dull red glow flickering erratically against the leather, as if sensing something unseen.

No, this was about what the Bloodseal was meant to unlock.

He spotted the entrance to the Tomb just ahead. It should have been collapsed, buried beneath the weight of fallen stone. But it wasn't. Someone had forced it open.

Caldrek exhaled through his teeth, taking in the freshly carved markings around the archway. These weren't old dwarven inscriptions—these were new, crude sigils painted in fresh blood. Symbols that twisted the longer he looked at them.

This wasn't an excavation. This was a summoning. Everything in his gut told him to turn back. But he already knew he wouldn't. He adjusted his grip on his dagger and stepped into the tomb. Darkness swallowed him whole. The air inside was wrong.

Before, this place had been stale, lifeless, a tomb undisturbed for centuries. Now, the air was thick with heat and damp, pulsing with something unseen—something alive. The scent of charred incense and blood mingled with the damp stone, crawling up his throat like a sickness. Someone had been digging.

The corridors were different from before—walls that had once been solid dwarven craftsmanship were now fractured, broken open, revealing tunnels and passages that had not been there before. Loose stone had been cleared away deliberately, as if someone had been looking for something hidden beneath the original tomb.

Caldrek crouched near the remains of an abandoned camp, scanning the scattered remnants of supplies—half-melted candles, empty vials, bloodstained ritual knives. A large arcane circle was smeared onto the stone floor, its ink thick and wet, like it had been drawn recently. Then his gaze lifted to the walls, and his stomach turned.

Strips of flayed skin had been pinned to the stone, stretched tight like parchment. Some bore symbols carved in jagged script, others looked blank—flayed from something that should not have been alive long enough to be skinned.

Caldrek exhaled slowly. He had seen plenty of horrors in his life. This was something worse. Then he heard the voices. Not the whispering nor the mindless moans of the dead. These were human voices. Caldrek pressed himself against a ruined column, his breathing steady as he watched from the shadows.

In the next chamber, a circle of cloaked figures stood before an open sarcophagus. Their robes were black, lined with silver thread, hoods drawn low over their faces as they chanted in rhythmic unison. At their center, bathed in the glow of candles flickering in unnatural hues, stood Lysara Volentis. She wasn't just watching. She was leading them.

Caldrek clenched his jaw. She had played him well. And beside her stood someone worse.

A tall, thin figure in layered robes, his hands stained dark with dried blood, whispering in a language that made the very air hum with unnatural energy. His voice slithered over the stone, sending a wrongness through the chamber, like something was pressing against the seams of reality, waiting to be let in. Caldrek forced himself to focus, listening.

“...the rightful ruler shall rise again...”

“...a debt paid in blood...”

“...the vessel has been marked... the key has been found...”

His fingers tightened around the strap of his satchel, feeling the Bloodseal pulse beneath the leather. The key. They weren't just trying to harness the Bloodseal's power. They were trying to wake something up. Caldrek didn't have time to think.

The chanting intensified, and a sudden shift in the air sent a ripple of pressure through the chamber. He felt it deep in his bones, a pull that made his teeth itch and his vision blur at the edges. The Bloodseal burned hot in his satchel, reacting to whatever unholy force was being conjured.

The necromancer's voice rose in pitch, his arms outstretched over the sarcophagus. Lysara stood motionless, her golden eyes locked on the stone coffin as the chanting reached its climax.

Then the first corpse moved. Caldrek saw it just at the edge of the chamber, slumped against the far wall—one of the robed cultists who had been sacrificed earlier in the ritual. His throat was still gaping open, his robes still drenched in blood. But he was moving. Then another corpse twitched. And another.

The chanting faltered as the bodies of the dead cultists jerked upright, their broken limbs snapping into unnatural positions, their eyes rolling white as their mouths gaped open.

But they weren't chanting. They were screaming. Something had gone wrong. The necromancer staggered back, realizing his mistake too late. They weren't controlling whatever they had summoned. It was controlling them.

Caldrek had seen enough. He gritted his teeth, reaching for a smoke bomb from his belt. He had one chance to get out of here alive. Then the sarcophagus cracked open. And everything got worse. The stone lid of the sarcophagus shattered outward, sending shards of rock exploding into the chamber. The robed cultists scrambled backward, their voices breaking into panicked screams.

Caldrek barely had time to react before a figure began to rise from the coffin. It was tall, armored, ancient. A skeletal frame wrapped in decayed ceremonial plate, its helm etched with runes long since worn away by time. But its eyes still burned. A deep, sickly red glow pulsed within its empty sockets, flickering in tandem with the Bloodseal still pulsing in Caldrek's satchel.

Then, the thing spoke. Its voice was not a whisper. It was a command. *"You woke me too soon, fools. But I will still take what is owed."*

Lysara took a single step back, for the first time looking afraid. The dead were rising. The cultists were screaming.

Fools, Caldrek thought grimly. They must have caught wind of the Bloodseal being retrieved. Now, like desperate vermin scurrying after scraps, they sought to siphon its lingering power, prying at the seams of death itself.

He had no love for the dead, but he feared men like these more—the kind too blinded by their own greed to realize they were meddling with forces that would consume them whole.

The necromancer staggered back, his confidence shattering like brittle glass. “We—w-we are your servants! We offer you blood, my lord! Grant us—”

The warrior moved too fast for something long dead. The greatsword cleaved through the necromancer’s midsection, splitting him in half with a wet, sickening crunch. His lifeblood splattered across the stone, steam rising where it met the unnaturally cold air.

For a heartbeat, the cultists froze. Then the undead stirred.

The corpses of the freshly sacrificed, their throats still slick with red, jerked upright like marionettes on invisible strings. Limbs twisted unnaturally, fingers clawed at the air, and in a discordant chorus of dry, rattling moans, they descended upon the living.

Panic erupted.

A robed acolyte turned to flee, only to be seized by a skeletal hand that drove its fingers through his ribs and tore his heart free. Another cultist shrieked as an emaciated corpse latched onto his back, its teeth sinking into his neck. Blood gushed, and the cultist’s cries turned into a wet gurgle.

The warrior raised his blade again, carving through flesh and bone alike. Cultists screamed, some trying to run, others bravely defended themselves, slashing some of the undead down.

Caldrek watched with cold detachment as the last of the cultists fell, their own hubris sealing their fate. Then, as the dust settled, he tightened his grip on his blades.

Only a handful of the risen dead remained, their empty eyes turning toward him.

“Right,” he muttered under his breath. “Guess I’m next.”

The first lunged. Caldrek sidestepped, his dagger flashing in the dim light. The blade punched through brittle ribs and straight into the thing’s spine. It twitched once, then collapsed into a heap of decayed remains.

Another came at him, grasping with clawed fingers. Caldrek ducked low, pivoting behind it, and drove his second dagger upward into the base of its skull. The undead gave a shudder before crumpling, its red eyes flickering out.

The skeletal warrior loomed at the far end of the chamber, watching. Caldrek exhaled sharply, kicking away the last twitching corpse at his feet. He flicked the blood from his daggers, eyeing the armored horror that had wiped out the entire cult.

The warrior's burning gaze met his own. For a moment, neither moved. Then, with a voice like wind through dry leaves, the warrior spoke: "You are not one of them."

Caldrek tightened his grip but said nothing. The warrior let out a low, hollow chuckle. "Then leave, thief. The dead have no quarrel with you... yet."

Caldrek hesitated, every instinct screaming at him to run. But his eyes flicked to the Bloodseal still resting in his satchel.

Power. A bargaining chip. A weapon against the Queen. The warrior noticed his gaze. The crimson eyes flared. "The dead will remember your name."

Caldrek exhaled. "They always do."

Then, Caldrek ran, the warrior's laughter echoing behind him.

The Queen's Errand

Caldrek staggered into the open air, the cold night wind biting against his sweat-drenched skin. He barely noticed. Every muscle in his body ached, his ribs screamed with every breath, and his left leg was stiff from the deep gash just above his knee.

But he was alive.

The Tomb loomed behind him, its depths still echoing with the distant, guttural howls of the undead he had left behind. He knew it wasn't over. The Revenant had awoken, and the Queen's ritual had succeeded in some form—just not in the way she had intended. Whatever had been sealed down there was walking again.

The Bloodseal sat hot and pulsing in his satchel, its glow brighter than ever, as if reacting to the chaos below.

He needed to move. His boots crunched against the cracked cobblestones, each step sluggish. His body screamed for rest, but he knew better. The job wasn't done. Then, as he took another step forward, something felt wrong. Instinct, honed from decades of surviving in the shadows, screamed at him. He wasn't alone.

Caldrek's hand inched toward his dagger, his tired eyes scanning the ruins ahead, heart pounding. His boots slowed as he passed beneath the stone pillars of an old colonnade, the wind carrying the scent of wet stone and burning candle wax.

And then he saw her. A lone figure, leaning casually against one of the weathered pillars, spinning a small, gleaming dagger between her fingers. Seraphine fucking Blackshade.

Caldrek exhaled sharply, forcing himself to stay steady, though every nerve in his body told him to get ready for a fight. She was smiling. "Took your time, thief," she said, her voice like silk lined with steel.

Caldrek stopped in his tracks, his pulse steady, but his body screaming at him to move, to fight, to run—anything but stand still.

Seraphine Blackshade leaned against the weathered stone pillar like she had all the time in the world, twirling a slender dagger between her gloved fingers. The wicked curve of the blade caught the moonlight, reflecting a dull, oily sheen—poisoned.

Of course it was.

She was exactly as he remembered her—tall, lean, wrapped in the kind of form-fitting leathers that made her movements impossible to track. Her midnight-black hair cascaded in waves over one shoulder, her dark eyes flickering with amusement, hunger, and something unreadable.

Caldrek's jaw clenched. He had expected the Queen to send someone after him. But not her. Seraphine was the kind of assassin you didn't see coming. She didn't hunt down bounties—she executed problems before they even knew they existed. And she was smiling at him.

"You look like shit, Caldrek," she said, not moving from her spot.

Caldrek shifted slightly, his stance loose, but his hand drifting toward the hidden blade at his belt. "Didn't realize the Queen was wasting her best killers on old thieves."

Seraphine laughed softly, flicking the dagger between her fingers. "Oh, don't flatter yourself. I'm not here for the bounty." Caldrek's eyes narrowed. "Then why are you here?"

She caught the dagger mid-spin, tilting her head slightly. "To see if you're still as quick as they say." She moved. A blur of black leather and steel. And suddenly, the dagger was flying straight for his throat. Caldrek barely moved in time.

The dagger whistled past his throat, close enough that he felt the poisoned edge kiss the air as it embedded itself into the crumbling stone behind him. He didn't have a chance to think, didn't have a chance to breathe—because Seraphine was already on him.

She moved like smoke and shadow, a blur of black leather and flashing steel, her second blade already slashing toward his ribs. Caldrek twisted, barely avoiding the cut, but her heel snapped forward, catching him in the gut. He grunted, stumbling back as she closed the distance again, relentless, merciless. Her twin daggers flickered like silver lightning, her strikes so fast they were almost impossible to track. Shallow cuts nicked his forearm, his shoulder, his side—nothing deep, but deliberate. Testing wounds. She was playing with him. Seraphine wasn't just toying with him—she was learning. She wasn't a brawler. She wasn't Mordrak, all brute strength and rage. No, Seraphine studied every movement with those sharp, obsidian eyes, adjusting, adapting, shifting her stance with each step. She was dancing.

Caldrek growled, dodging another strike, twisting to create just enough distance to reach for the dagger at his belt. But she was already there. Seraphine's boot slammed into his wrist, disarming him, sending his blade clattering to the ground. Then she smiled. "Slower than I expected," she murmured, her voice almost teasing. Caldrek spat blood onto the cobblestones. "And you talk more than I remember."

Caldrek saw the next attack too late. Seraphine's blade came in low, slicing deep across his ribs. The steel bit through leather and flesh, and a hot rush of blood soaked his side. The pain was sharp, white-hot, but Caldrek had felt worse. He gritted his teeth, staggering back. Seraphine didn't press the attack. She just watched him bleed, her daggers still poised, her body still relaxed—like she knew she had already won. "That looked like it hurt," she murmured, tilting her head. "You should sit down before you fall down."

Caldrek exhaled sharply, his stance shifting just slightly. The cut was bad, but not deep enough to slow him down yet. She had been precise, keeping her strikes controlled, avoiding immediate kill shots. That meant she wasn't trying to kill him. Which meant he still had a chance. Seraphine moved again, readying another attack—but she made her first mistake.

She got too close. Caldrek's left hand snapped to his belt, fingers curling around the small, round object tucked behind his pouch.

A smoke bomb. Seraphine's eyes flickered—just a fraction of a second of realization—too late. Caldrek smashed it against the ground. A thick burst of black smoke exploded between them, swallowing the ruined colonnade in an instant. Seraphine cursed, blinded. She shifted back, but Caldrek was already moving through the smoke. One step. Two. Then he was on her. His body slammed into hers, knocking her off balance. She twisted, lightning-fast, trying to counter, but his weight drove her down against the cold stone.

By the time the smoke cleared, Caldrek was straddling her, one knee pinning her arm, his blade pressed to the soft curve of her throat. Seraphine's breath was steady, her body still, her lips still curled into something far too amused for someone who had just been bested. Then, she smiled. "Well now, Blackthane," she purred, voice soft, teasing, sharp beneath the honey.

Caldrek narrowed his eyes. "Not so fast now, are you?"

She laughed softly, tilting her head just enough for the blade to bite against her skin. "I never planned to kill you, thief," she whispered. Caldrek's grip didn't loosen. "Then what the hell was all that?" Seraphine grinned. "I just wanted to see if you were worth it." And in her eyes, for the first time that night, he saw it. Not just amusement. Satisfaction. Like she had just confirmed something she already suspected. Like she had just decided something important. Like Caldrek Blackthane was about to be pulled into something even worse than what he had just crawled out of.

Caldrek arrived at The Sooted Weasel, the low-lit tavern humming with the drunken voices of cutthroats, mercs, and thieves looking for their next coin. He had chosen this place for a reason—it was neutral ground, or at least it was supposed to be.

Veyra was waiting for him in the back corner, lounging against the booth, a tankard in one hand, her dagger lazily twirling between her fingers in the other. She looked pleased with herself.

"You're late," she purred, golden eyes flicking to the satchel at his side.

Caldrek slid into the booth across from her, his ribs still sore from his fight with Seraphine. "You got what I asked for?"

Veyra smiled. "You got what I want?"

Caldrek exhaled, tapping his fingers against the worn wooden table. He should have known something was off. The way Veyra's eyes gleamed too brightly, the way the air around the booth felt too still, like a trap waiting to be sprung. The moment his fingers touched the satchel, Veyra moved. A whistle of steel. A dagger flashing toward his throat.

Caldrek barely dodged, twisting back as the blade sliced the edge of his cheek. Then, all hell broke loose. Four of Veyra's men sprang from the shadows, steel flashing, fists swinging.

The tavern erupted into chaos—chairs overturned, tankards crashed to the floor, and within seconds, Caldrek was fighting for his life. He took out the first bastard with a swift elbow to the throat, grabbing his wrist and slamming his own dagger into his ribs. Blood sprayed, but there was no time to breathe—another fist connected with his gut, sending pain flaring through his already injured ribs. Caldrek staggered, but he was used to pain. He twisted low, dodging another blade, smashing a stool into the next attacker's skull.

Veyra just laughed, watching from her booth. "Should've known better. You always trust the wrong people." Caldrek spat blood onto the floor. "And you always pick the losing side." The fight was fast, brutal, and left him bloody. He took down three men, but the fourth slammed a bottle against his head, sending him crashing into the bar. Everything blurred. The last thing he saw was Veyra smiling down at him, before darkness threatened to take over. Then, a familiar voice. "You really are a godsdamned idiot." Velka.

The moment she saw Caldrek collapse, blood pooling beneath his head, something inside her snapped. Veyra barely had time to smirk before Velka was on her like a storm, fists and steel flashing in the dim lantern light.

The first punch shattered Veyra's grin, snapping her head sideways with a sickening crack. Blood sprayed from her nose, but Velka didn't let up. She grabbed a fistful of Veyra's hair and slammed her face into the table—once, twice—splintering the wood beneath the force of her rage.

Veyra groaned, dazed, but Velka hauled her back up just to drive a knee into her ribs. The breath left Veyra in a strangled gasp, her body folding over like a rag doll. She tried to twist away, to counter, but Velka was faster. A brutal elbow to her jaw sent her sprawling to the floor, where she landed hard on her side, coughing up blood.

"You always did talk too much," Velka growled, stepping over her like a predator. "But I don't give a damn about your little games, Veyra. I'm done playing."

Veyra spat blood, golden eyes burning with defiance even as her limbs trembled. She tried to push herself up, but Velka stomped on her wrist, pinning it to the floor with enough force to crack bone. Veyra hissed in pain, her free hand fumbling for the dagger at her hip. Velka saw it coming a mile away.

She caught Veyra's wrist before the blade could reach her and wrenched it violently, dislocating the shoulder with a wet pop. Veyra's scream was raw, her body convulsing from the shock of pain.

"Listen close," Velka snarled, crouching over her, pressing the tip of her knife to the hollow of Veyra's throat. "You're done. The Velvet Knives are *mine* now. You step down, or I cut you open right here and leave you bleeding on this godsdamned floor."

Veyra's breath came in ragged gasps, blood dripping from her split lip, but she still bared her teeth in a broken smirk. "*You don't have the guts to kill me, Velka.*"

Velka pressed the blade deeper, just enough to break the skin. A thin trickle of red ran down Veyra's neck.

"You really want to test me?" Velka whispered.

For the first time, Veyra's smirk faltered. She wasn't stupid—she saw the truth in Velka's eyes. This wasn't a bluff. Velka wasn't playing for territory, for power—she was playing for blood, and she was *winning*.

Veyra swallowed hard, her body betraying her even as her pride refused to let her beg. Her fingers twitched, but her limbs were too weak, her vision swimming from the beating she'd barely survived.

Velka leaned in, her voice a whisper of steel. "Say it."

Veyra gritted her teeth, her breaths shuddering.

"*The Knives are yours,*" she rasped.

Velka held her gaze for a long moment, searching for any hint of deception. Then, finally, she smiled—a sharp, victorious thing.

"Good girl," she murmured, before slamming the hilt of her dagger into Veyra's temple. The woman crumpled to the floor, unconscious, blood pooling around her bruised and broken body.

Velka exhaled, wiping her blade clean on Veyra's shirt before turning to Caldrek's still form. "*Damn idiot,*" she muttered under her breath.

With a grunt, she hoisted his unconscious body over her shoulder and stalked out of *The Sooted Weasel*, leaving the once-feared queen of the Velvet Knives bleeding in the dirt where she belonged.

By the time the first of Veyra's men found her, Velka was already gone—Caldrek in tow, heading straight for Mother Vaelle's sanctuary.

The throne room of Castle Blackreach was silent and cold, its towering blackstone pillars stretching into the gloom, torches casting long, flickering shadows against the high walls. The scent of burning incense and oiled steel hung thick in the air.

At the center of the room, upon her gilded throne, sat Queen Isolde.

She looked calm. Too calm. A queen of ice and steel, wrapped in a gown of deep crimson, the golden embroidery tracing the patterns of coiled vipers across her sleeves. The cold gleam of cunning and cruelty danced behind her emerald-green eyes as she swirled a goblet of dark wine, watching the firelight twist in its depths. At the foot of the dais, Mordrak Ironspine knelt. The Queen's enforcer. Her executioner.

The brute of a man was half-shadowed in the dim torchlight, his massive, armored frame covered in battle scars and dried blood. His breath was slow, steady, the air around him charged with restrained violence. He didn't speak. He never did, not unless commanded to.

Isolde finally set her goblet down, the soft clink of metal against stone the only sound in the vast chamber. "It seems our little thief still breathes, Mordrak," she said softly, tapping one elegant finger against the armrest of her throne. Mordrak's expression remained unreadable, but his head tilted slightly.

"Blackthane," Isolde continued, as if savoring the name. "He's bled for us, stolen from us, yet he refuses to kneel. I find it... tiresome."

She rose from her throne with slow, measured grace, descending the steps toward him. Even in her delicate stride, there was power, a queen who ruled with daggers hidden behind honeyed smiles. She reached Mordrak, tilting his chin up with one cold finger. "End this." Mordrak nodded once. No words. No hesitation. Then, without another breath, he turned and strode from the throne room, his heavy boots echoing across the blackstone floor. The final hunt had begun. And Caldrek Blackthane would not escape this time.

Pain woke him before the light did. Caldrek's ribs ached like hell, his head still throbbing from the barfight at The Sooted Weasel. The metallic taste of blood and stale ale clung to his tongue, and his whole body felt like a sack of broken stones.

Slowly, his eyes adjusted to the dim glow of a flickering lantern. The scent of burning herbs and aged parchment filled the air, and he immediately knew where he was. Mother Vaelle's sanctuary. A hidden shrine, tucked away in the ruins of the old Blackreach catacombs, buried beneath the city's filth. Few people even knew it existed, and fewer still dared to seek it out.

Caldrek shifted in the stiff cot, groaning as fresh pain lanced through his side. "Lie still, thief." The voice was dry as parchment, yet carried the weight of absolute authority.

Mother Vaelle stood in the far corner of the chamber, watching him with those sharp, knowing eyes. A woman of indeterminate age, her skin like weathered stone, her robes layered in deep green and brown, the color of forgotten places and long-buried secrets.

She moved like a whisper of wind, carrying a bowl of steaming black liquid that smelled somewhere between bitter medicine and grave dirt. "Drink."

Caldrek grunted. "If it tastes as bad as it smells, I'd rather die."

"You'd rather die every time you come here, yet you keep crawling back, Blackthane." She placed the bowl on the wooden table beside him. "Drink. Before your insides rot faster than your morals." Caldrek sighed and took the bowl. It was hot, thick, and tasted like something scraped off the bottom of a tomb. But almost instantly, the pain dulled.

Vaelle watched him, arms crossed. "The Queen knows you live. Mordrak is hunting."

Caldrek exhaled sharply, setting the bowl down. "Of course he is. Bastard never stays dead long enough to be useful." Mother Vaelle's gaze darkened. "You cannot fight him, thief. Not now." Caldrek gave a crooked grin, despite the pain. "Wasn't planning to."

Vaelle arched an unimpressed brow. "Then what foolishness do you intend?"

Caldrek stretched, feeling the tug of his stitched wounds, but the fire inside him had already reignited. "I intend to make the Queen regret sending him after me."

Mother Vaelle sighed. "Then I hope your bones enjoy the grave. Because you'll be in it soon enough."

Caldrek just smiled. He had one last trick left to play.

The chamber beneath the shrine was quiet, save for the crackling of a single candle and the faint dripping of water from the catacomb tunnels beyond. Caldrek sat cross-legged on the stone floor, nursing what was left of his strength while Eryndil paced in front of him, deep in thought. The elf was still too clean for this city, his robes only slightly wrinkled, his long silver hair tied back in a way that suggested he hadn't fully given up on dignity just yet. But there was tension in his face, a tightness around his jaw that hadn't been there before.

Eryndil stopped pacing and exhaled sharply. "So. You've finally decided to stop running." Caldrek snorted, wincing as his ribs protested. "Didn't say that. Just need a better direction to run in." Eryndil folded his arms. "And this grand plan of yours? What is it, exactly?"

Caldrek tilted his head toward his satchel, where the Bloodseal still pulsed with a slow, dangerous glow. "We expose the Queen."

Eryndil arched a brow. "You mean assassinate her?"

"I mean destroy her from the inside," Caldrek corrected. He pulled a rolled parchment from his coat, unfurling it on the ground. It was the ledger—the Queen's hit list. Every name crossed off in blood-red ink, every deal made in the shadows.

"We've got proof," Caldrek said. "Proof that Queen Isolde has been bleeding this city dry, selling power to the highest bidder, using dark magic to bring back things that should stay buried." He tapped the parchment. "These names? Every one of them was a threat to her rule. Every one of them ended up dead."

Eryndil studied the ledger, his fingers tightening around the fabric of his sleeve. "If we release this, the entire noble court will collapse," he murmured. "Good," Caldrek muttered.

"About time Blackreach got a little fresh blood in its veins. The Queen's reign ends in fire, or it doesn't end at all."

Eryndil let out a humorless chuckle. "You always did have a taste for chaos, Blackthane." Caldrek grinned. "Comes with the job." Eryndil exhaled, shaking his head. Then he stepped forward and extended a gloved hand. "Then let's burn this empire down."

Caldrek clasped it, shaking firmly. The final move was in play. The city burned.

Cinder Hollow—a district already steeped in filth and desperation—now choked on its own ashes. Flames leapt from rooftops, turning the narrow alleys into tunnels of flickering orange and blackened smoke. The air was thick with the stench of burning wood, seared flesh, and old oil-fed fire. And at the center of the carnage, Mordrak Ironspine hunted. He moved like a war-god carved from stone, his massive armored form casting a shadow over the streets as he dragged men from their hiding places, smashing through doors, flipping wagons with terrifying ease.

"WHERE IS HE?"

His voice roared through the district, cutting through the chaos like a warhorn. He had already killed three men just for being in his way, and now the streets were full of corpses and cowering bystanders. A pack of Blackreach enforcers trailed behind him, their torches licking at the night, setting fire to anything that might be shielding the rat they were after.

A drunken beggar, too slow to get out of the way, barely had time to plead before Mordrak's boot cracked his skull against the cobblestones. A woman screamed. A child sobbed in the shadows. The people of Cinder Hollow had seen plenty of violence before, but never like this. This wasn't justice. It was a purge.

Mordrak grabbed a scrawny street thief by the collar, lifting him effortlessly into the air. "Tell me where Blackthane is," he growled. "Or I'll rip your lungs out through your mouth."

The boy pissed himself. "I-I don't know! I swear!"

Mordrak snarled and hurled him into a burning cart, turning away before the kid's screams had even finished. "Find him," he barked to his men. "Burn everything until he has nowhere left to hide."

The Queen's orders were clear. Caldrek Blackthane would die screaming. And this city would burn with him.

Caldrek watched the flames from the rooftops, a dark silhouette against the burning skyline of Cinder Hollow. The air stank of ash and fear, the wails of the desperate echoing below as Mordrak's enforcers tore through the streets like rabid hounds. He wiped a smear of blood from his temple. His wounds still ached, but he didn't have time to care. Mordrak was sending a message. Burn everything. Leave nowhere to run. This city belongs to the Queen.

Caldrek exhaled through gritted teeth. No. Not anymore. This wasn't a hunt—it was a war. And he was done running.

A flicker of movement caught his eye—Eryndil, crouched on a neighboring rooftop, his elven grace barely disturbed by the heat rising from the fires below. He had the ledger clutched under one arm, the Queen's secrets in ink and blood.

Caldrek met his gaze, and they both knew. This was the moment. If they waited any longer, there'd be no city left to save. Caldrek rolled his shoulders, ignoring the pull of his stitches, the burn of exhaustion creeping into his limbs. His hands curled into fists.

"We strike first," he murmured. Eryndil gave a small, knowing nod. "Then let's give Blackreach something to remember." Caldrek grinned. Tomorrow, the Queen would wake to a city turned against her. Tomorrow, her rule would begin to crumble. And tonight? Tonight, Caldrek Blackthane would remind the city why it had once feared his name.

The Duel

The palace loomed ahead, its towering blackstone walls casting long shadows beneath the pale glow of the moon. Caldrek crouched behind a gargoyle ledge, scanning the guards patrolling the upper balconies and torchlit courtyards.

The Queen would be waiting. She knew he was coming. And so did Mordrak.

Caldrek adjusted the dagger at his belt, his wounds still aching from the last few days of bloodshed, but he forced the pain aside. This was the end. He could almost smell the victory in the air— Then the air shifted. A deep, rumbling presence behind him. The sound of metal grinding against itself. Caldrek didn't have to turn to know who it was.

A low, gravelly chuckle rumbled through the night. "You really thought you could walk into the palace without me finding you?" Caldrek twisted, just in time to dodge the first attack.

Mordrak's massive greatsword carved through the stone where he had been crouched, shattering the ledge beneath him. Caldrek rolled onto a lower balcony, barely keeping his footing. Mordrak loomed above him, stepping into the moonlight. Armor scorched, face carved from fury and battle scars, eyes gleaming with the promise of murder.

"This time, Blackthane, I'm not stopping until there's nothing left of you to bury."

Caldrek wiped the blood from his lip, smiling. "You talk too much, Mordrak. Let's get this over with." The final fight had begun. Mordrak lunged, his massive greatsword whistling through the air, a blur of steel and death. Caldrek barely sidestepped, the blade carving through the stone balcony like it was rotting wood, sending shards of blackstone flying. His body screamed, his ribs fractured, his blood slicking his leathers, but he didn't let it slow him. He couldn't. Mordrak fought like a force of nature, too strong, too relentless—Caldrek wasn't going to beat him with brute force.

Which meant he had to cheat.

Caldrek dodged another swing, but the next caught him across the shoulder, sending him sprawling against the palace wall. Pain lanced through his body, and his vision flickered for half a second—half a second too long. Mordrak was already moving, raising his sword for the killing blow. Caldrek's hand snapped to his satchel.

The Bloodseal pulsed beneath his fingers, its warmth spreading through his palm. Not just a relic. Not just a key. A source of power. Mordrak sneered, blade descending. "Enough running, Blackthane." Caldrek grinned through the blood in his teeth. "Not running. Just winning." He smashed the Bloodseal against Mordrak's chest. The effect was instant.

A howling scream tore from Mordrak's throat as the Bloodseal's crimson light surged into him, veins blackening, flesh burning as the cursed energy of the tomb consumed him. His body convulsed violently, his massive frame jerking like a puppet with severed strings. The red glow spread through his body, turning his armor to molten slag, his skin peeling away in charred, smoking ribbons.

He tried to speak—tried to lift his blade one last time—but there was nothing left of him to fight with. With a final guttural snarl, Mordrak collapsed onto his knees, his body crumbling into ash. The great Mordrak Ironspine was no more.

Caldrek staggered backward, breathing hard, the Bloodseal still glowing in his palm. It had worked.

But as he looked down at the faint red veins still flickering in his own skin, he realized— The Bloodseal had taken something from him, too. But there was no time to dwell on that. Because the Queen was waiting. And he still had one last job to finish.

The throne room was silent, save for the faint flickering of candlelight against the polished obsidian floors. Too quiet. Too still. Caldrek stepped forward, his boots leaving a trail of blood behind him, his body screaming for rest. But there was no time for that. Not yet.

And there she was. Queen Isolde. She sat upon her gilded throne, her crimson gown spilling over the polished blackstone steps like a river of blood. Not a single strand of her golden hair out of place, her emerald eyes watching him with unreadable amusement.

Caldrek expected fear. He expected anger, desperation, a fight. But she only smiled. "So. You've come." Caldrek gritted his teeth, feeling the Bloodseal pulse in his grip, its warmth still lingering, the energy still thrumming in his veins.

"You killed my people, Isolde. You burned the city to the ground. You brought back something that should've stayed buried."

She tilted her head, almost bored. "And yet, you're still here." Caldrek took another step forward, dagger in hand. "You know how this ends." Isolde let out a soft chuckle. "Do I?"

She rose slowly, descending the steps, her movements graceful, careful, deliberate. Even now, even with her empire crumbling around her, she played the game. "You've spent your life crawling through the filth, Blackthane, scurrying in the dark." She stopped just a step away from him, eyes gleaming. "And now, here you are. A kingmaker. A legend. The man who toppled a throne."

Caldrek tightened his grip on the dagger. She leaned in, voice barely a whisper. "Go on, then. Do what you've come to do. Kill me." Caldrek stared at her. He had waited years for this. For vengeance. For justice. For an end. His fingers curled around the hilt of his blade. Then— He let it go.

The dagger clattered to the floor, the sound ringing out in the silent chamber. Isolde's brow arched slightly, but there was no surprise. Caldrek exhaled, shaking his head. "No."

Her lips curled into a slow, knowing smile. "No?" He stepped back, the exhaustion hitting him all at once. "I've already killed your reign, Isolde. That's enough." Her smile didn't fade. If anything, it deepened. "Wise choice."

Caldrek turned away, leaving her standing in the ruins of her own empire. She had lost. And somehow, that was a better punishment than death. Caldrek reached the doorway, his body screaming for rest, his mind already leaving this cursed palace behind. But something stopped him. No. Just walking away wasn't enough.

She would still have power—still have influence. A woman like Isolde didn't need a throne to be dangerous. She was a snake, one that could slither back into the shadows, whisper into the right ears, and rebuild everything he had just torn down.

If he left her with even a scrap of control, she would find a way to claw her way back. He turned back toward the throne, toward her. Isolde was still watching him, her serpentine smile unwavering, as if she had already calculated her next move.

"Changed your mind, thief?" Caldrek didn't answer. He just pulled the Bloodseal from his satchel. The moment it touched his palm, the red sigils flared to life, pulsing like a heartbeat, whispering in a language that made the air shudder.

For the first time, Isolde's expression flickered. She knew. "Wait—"

He moved fast. Caldrek slammed the Bloodseal against her bare wrist. A flash of searing crimson light engulfed the chamber, the magic twisting, binding, branding her flesh with its cursed mark. Isolde screamed, a real scream—not of pain, but of pure fury. The veins along her pale skin blackened, the sigil searing into her like a brand forged in the depths of the tomb itself.

Caldrek stepped back, watching as she collapsed to her knees, clutching her arm, her breath ragged. Her power was gone. Not just her throne. The Bloodseal had marked her, cursed her. No noble house would take her in. No sorcerer would risk standing beside her. No assassin would dare fight for her. She wasn't just dethroned—she was untouchable.

She looked up at him, eyes burning with murderous hate. "You... you fool."

Caldrek smiled. "Now you get to see what it's like to be hunted."

He turned, walking away as the throne room echoed with her ragged breaths, her shaking fury. The great Queen Isolde—once the most powerful woman in Blackreach—was now just another marked soul with nowhere left to run.

And Caldrek Blackthane? His job was finally done.

A Thief's End

The city was burning.

Not with the wild, unchecked flames of Mordrak's purge, but with something deeper, something inevitable—rebellion, blood feuds, the end of an era. The Queen's power had collapsed overnight, and with it, the fragile balance of fear and control that had kept Blackreach in check. Now, the vultures were circling.

Caldrek sat atop the bell tower of the old Cathedral, a bottle of cheap dwarven wine in one hand, watching the city tear itself apart. From this height, he could see the Velvet Knives carving their way through what remained of the Queen's enforcers, street gangs claiming territory like wild dogs, the noble houses retreating behind their fortified estates, desperate to see who would rise from the ashes.

And at the center of it all? Velka. She had wasted no time. The Velvet Knives had always been a fractured mess of cutthroats, spies, and double-dealers, but now? Now they had a new leader.

She stood atop the balcony of the Blackthorne Estate, the old guild hall that had once belonged to a noble family now draped in the sigil of the Knives. She was flanked by her lieutenants, her bandaged ear the only evidence of the hell they had crawled through to get here.

Caldrek could almost hear her from here, addressing the assembled thieves and killers below.

"The Queen is dead. The crown is broken. This city belongs to us now." The cheers echoed through the night. Caldrek took another swig from the bottle. He should have felt satisfied. But instead, he just felt tired.

Caldrek made his way through the shadows of Blackreach, stepping carefully over bodies that hadn't yet cooled, past half-burnt banners bearing the Queen's sigil, now trampled into the mud. The city was broken, its power shifting like a coin flipped mid-air.

But it wasn't his problem anymore. Not really. As he approached the eastern gate, something flickered in the corner of his vision—movement.

He turned, hand already drifting toward his dagger. Veyra.

She stood at the far end of the alley, wrapped in a deep blue cloak, her golden eyes gleaming under the lantern glow. Her expression was unreadable, but Caldrek could see the sharp edges of something dangerous underneath.

"You should be dead, Blackthane." Her voice was smooth, but there was a bite beneath it. Caldrek smiled. "A lot of people think that." Veyra took a slow step forward, then stopped. She wasn't here to fight. Not yet.

"This city's not done with you, thief," she murmured. "You might walk away now, but we both know you'll be back. And when you do..." She tilted her head, a slow, wicked smile curving her lips. "I'll be waiting."

Then, before he could answer, she turned and melted into the darkness, gone like a ghost. Caldrek exhaled, shaking his head. He didn't doubt her. Veyra never let go of a grudge. And neither did Blackreach.

He left the city before dawn, slipping through the eastern roads, the distant mountains rising before him, the taste of wine and blood still lingering on his tongue. He should have felt free. But something was wrong. His fingers brushed over the scar on his palm—the mark where the Bloodseal had burned itself into him. It was cold. Too cold. And in the back of his mind, something whispered. Something old. Something hungry. He pulled his cloak tighter around him, muttering a curse. No. Not tonight. Not yet.

But even as he walked toward the horizon, away from the ruins of the empire he had helped destroy, one thought refused to leave him. Bloodseal doesn't let go. Not forever.